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by Lauran Paine

SHOOT-OUT AT TINHORN
by Ruel McDaniel

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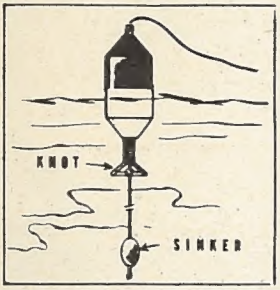

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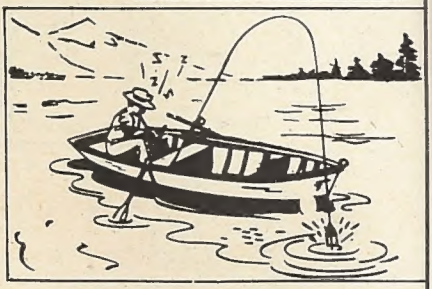

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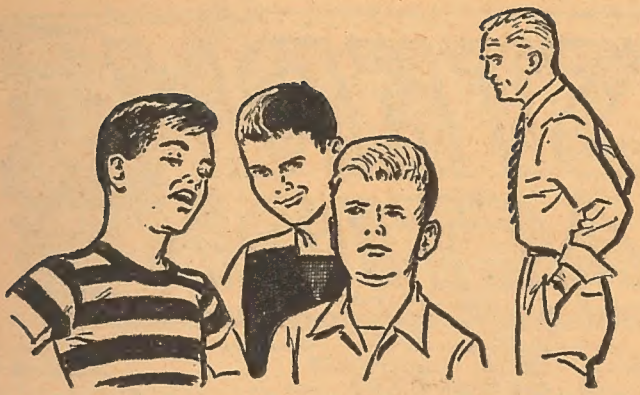

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WESTERN ACTION

Volume 20 May, 1957 Number 6

Novelets

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Flora Cowden was a blonde angel, but was she an angel from hell? She seemed to be the "higher up" behind this mysterious gang that held Tinhorn in its grasp.

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As soon as Eli Burns saw the gent who called himself Payfer, he knew who was behind the hell-raising here. But what was Payfer after, this time? That was the question.

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Betty Lane knew the latest scientific methods of ranching—but she didn't even know the old-fashioned ones of avoiding being swindled . . . or murdered!

ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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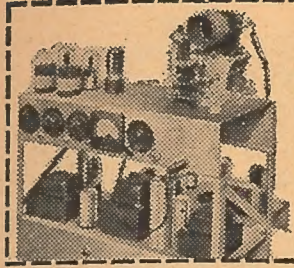

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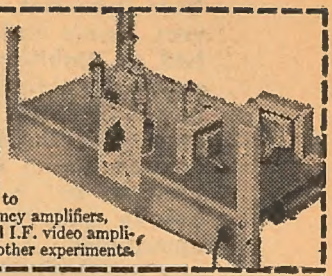

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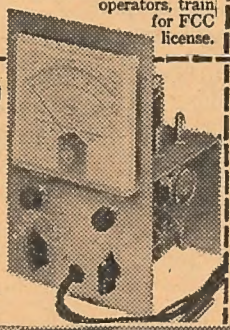

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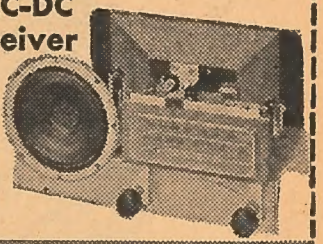

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This "one riot, One Ranger" line sounded very heroic and inspiring, but Enoch Troy had an ambition. He wanted to be pointed out as the oldest living ex-Ranger. And that meant that he had to use brains in cleaning up a town like Tinhorn. Only, so far, all he seemed to be doing was getting himself knocked out, and coming to with a lovely blonde girl bending over him—a woman apparently as crooked and dangerous as she was beautiful!

SHOOT-OUT AT TINHORN

Novelet of a Lawless Town

by Ruel McDaniel

FIRST, THE pounding in his head, like sledge-hammers driving railroad spikes. And fog... and a feeling of spinning into a great hazy void. Finally one eye opened and the fog drifted and the smell of perfume touched his senses.

"What the—?" he muttered. He tried to rise, and the fog swirled again and he groaned.

"He's coming around." The voice seemed far-away and it was feminine, but the tone was not solicitous.

He made another effort with his eyelids. This time he managed. Out there, still reeling crazily, were a dressing

Flora Cowden was in the window, levelling a rifle . . .

table and silver-framed mirror, a dainty chair, a dressing gown hanging on the wall. Things feminine and foreign. He groaned. Like a man feeling his way in the dark on the lip of a gorge, he tried pulling his elbow up under him. Things reeled again, but this time the fog stayed away.

"Here. I'll help you. You can make it. It's only a knot on your head. Should've been a bullet through your gullet!"

"Thanks," he muttered. His shaking hand dry-washed his face, then explored the bump on his head. "Whew!" he exclaimed as the hand touched the raw flesh of the wound. "Who—Where?"

"And I thought you'd say something different." A throaty chuckle followed the feminine voice. "That's exactly what they all ask."

"Well," he muttered. "That proves I'm just an ordinary guy." He tried the other elbow and fought off the dark fingers of dizziness as he propped himself to a sitting position. "Whew!" He shook his head fiercely and unruly red hair cascaded over his forehead and into his eyes.

"Drink this." She handed him black coffee, and even in his confusion he noticed the expensive china. He explored its savor with a sip, then gulped the full contents.

"Thanks." He moved his feet cautiously to the carpeted floor and tentatively explored the possibility of standing. He rescued himself by leaning against the wall and closed his

eyes till the reeling stopped. "I—I'll be going now. But to satisfy a creeping curiosity, would you mind telling me what happened? Who conked me?"

A Mexican woman, whose short frame jellied as she walked, emerged into the room and removed the cup and saucer. She looked at him and a slow grin mapped her face. *"El Senor* mebbe all right now. *Senor* butt head against wall, no?" She waddled out, chuckling.

"Senor is ready to travel, Maria," the woman said; and he tried for a once-over description: Blonde; real, he decided; in the vague late 20's or maybe thirty, built the way he would build a woman for himself if he were a human architect, with bulges in exactly the right places; light blue eyes that at time turned cold as a killer's; a hardness around her firm lips; too much make-up. He liked the way she walked—like a nymph gliding through a morning mist—or a tigress noiselessly stalking, as her moods changed. All this he noticed, in spite of the torment in his head.

"All right, Ranger, here's your hat. Either end of the street leads out of Tinhorn; take your choice. But take it now!" She was the tigress now, and her eyes were as hard as agates.

He looked down at her and a grin moved his lips. "But you haven't answered those questions. When I go, it'ud be some comfort if I knew who slugged me, and why?"

She faced him, and small fists came to abrupt anchor at her hips. "If it'll make you feel any better, which it won't, you were hit by my bartender. Pid Holler resents strangers with their ears pressed against my door. You're lucky. Pid's a bad boy, and he just naturally don't like strangers. Especially if they're rangers."

"So you know," he muttered. Disappointment fathomed his senses and it rode his voice.

"Why not? Boy, did you talk! Your name's Troy—Enoch, I think you said. You kept muttering about a fellow named Pete—Pete Hawkins. You had to get somebody or other. Yeah, you talked."

He shook off the gloom of sudden disappointment, and mustered a grin. "And of course you're Flora Cowden. The boss of Tinhorn."

He saw the fire rise to her cheeks and explode in her eyes. "I'm a saloonkeeper and entertainer. I know the score. We don't need a funeral in Tinhorn today, and that's why you're leaving. Now." She opened the door and handed him his black, trail-stained hat.

He accepted the hat. He bowed faintly. "Miss Cowden, thanks for tiding me over my—accident. When I have my next one, I hope it'll be right in front of your door."

OF COURSE Enoch Troy had no intention of leaving Tinhorn, today or any other day, until he did the job he was sent to do; but if Flora Cowden, and the others in town who were displeased by his presence got the idea that he was leaving, it might salvage something of his plans. He walked leisurely to Canyon Cafe and ate a steak. The food nourished his punished body, and a wholesome tiredness replaced taut nerves. It was now past seven o'clock in the morning; and as the events of the night before gradually fell into a pattern, he realized that he had been out since around three o'clock that night. He remembered slipping through the rear door of Flora's *Coyote Saloon* and up the stairs to her door. A man had furtively entered that door, and his presence might be a piece of the puzzle he must pattern out to do the job he was sworn to do. He recalled nothing said between the man and Flora Cowden, so evidently the barkeeper had seen him and knocked him out almost at once.

As he paid his meal check, he no-

ticed the way the walrus-mustached man looked at him; and as he walked along the street, exploring its characteristics, he saw people trade him furtive glances and form little clusters as he moved out of ear-shot.

Obviously the news of his coming —and of the job he was supposed to do—had touched the ears of the people. Someone had been a tattling busybody.

Of course that clout on the head had upset his entire plans. He muttered a reproach for his carelessness. He had intended riding into Tinhorn with all the trail-trapping of a saddle-bum, getting a job and keeping his ears open as long as necessary. He wanted thoroughness rather than speed, although the thought of what this blatant town had done to Pete Hawkins swamped his thoughts with urgency.

Pete Hawkins was a ranger, and that was enough to incite any other ranger for personal revenge upon the killers; but Pete was more than another ranger to Enoch Troy. He was his nephew. He was dead, at the hands of Tinhorn killers; and Enoch had persuaded young Hawkins to join the rangers. The burden of young Hawkins' death was an urgent torment in Enoch's mind.

He must kill time, for when he did saddle up and head out either end of Tinhorn's main street, he wanted his apparent going well advertised. He had wasted away his advantage of surprise by permitting himself to be knocked out. This time, he must regain at least part of his loss.

He remembered that the evening before, as he neared town his strawberry roan moved with a slight limp, and an examination at the livery stable revealed a loose shoe. Now he strolled leisurely toward the livery stable, and his experienced eyes sized up the town: Loud and cheap and straining to effect the dignity of permanence, but failing as all boom towns do. The main street snaked right and left in its careless direction, to conform to the pattern of the two ranges of hills that pressed down from both sides. He scanned the *Coyote Saloon* again and saw that it was the most ornate establishment in town. And there was the bank, where so much of the trouble centered, and the Jenkins Emporium, "Latest women's fashions from Paris and New York."

DUST MUSHROOMED on the warming dry air as an occasional horseman rode the street, and a yellow-fringed surrey pulled by spirited dapple-grays churned up a small mountain of drifting dust. As the rig passed, he saw that the occupant was Flora Cowden. When he lifted his hat, she turned her face away and touched the team with her whip.

He shrugged. He still had not recovered completely from the shock of Flora Cowden. Of course he knew that a woman by that name ran the *Coyote* in Tinhorn, that she was mixed up in some way with the series of bank robberies and murders, for reports had reached ranger headquarters. But the reports had neglected to mention that she was a beautiful and desirable woman. The sight of her now started that vague feeling of emptiness in his life, that need for something which a lawman's job could not fill.

He shook his head to blot out the thoughts. If reports were correct, before he left Tinhorn, this woman would be behind bars; and it would be his work that put her there. A man thirty-five years old and packing a ranger's star had forfeited his right to thoughts of man's inner wants.

At the livery stable he saddled his roan and mounted. He guided the mount to the blacksmith shop, the limp now gone but the shoe still needing attention.

The blacksmith was one of the most powerfully-built men that Enoch Troy

had ever seen. About forty, Enoch judged; he wore a heavy jet-black beard and his clothes bulged with powerful muscles. He could lift an anvil with one hand and not even grunt.

"New here." It was a statement of fact, not a question. "Ain't got that Tinhorn look yet," he cackled in a high-pitched voice totally foreign to his giant build. "Dunno what yore business is, but better shy clear o' bankers and general-store keepers, if'n you want to hold onto yore gold or cash." He laughed mirthlessly.

He examined the dun's shoes. "Rode in from the east, I see. Come fur? From around White City, I'd say. Ranger feller named—let me see—"

"Pete Hawkins?"

"Hawkins—that's the feller. Rode in from White City awhile back. Fust thing you know, he got down with a terrible lead pizen. Never did get over it." He spat a stream of snuff-juice into the smouldering coals.

"Hated to see him get it," the big man talked on, as if unmindful for the moment of Enoch's presence. "Nice feller. Had the hobbles on a certain high-roller. Too bad."

Troy sensed that the smithy was rambling along to feel him out. He looked and acted like a man who maybe couldn't teach a settin' hen to cluck, but he was clever enough to do a lot of things which he himself must know before he could ride out of Tinhorn; and he felt the man would have to know a lot more about him before he talked.

ENOCH'S impulse was to put the questions he wanted answered directly to the smithy, but deliberation told him the man must be cultivated before he talked, if he talked at all except in riddles.

"I'm not as interested in who's killed who," Troy said idly and with a crooked grin, "as I am in a certain lady saloon-keeper. There's a woman to intrigue a man!"

"Pizen," the big man muttered. "Wonderful, but still pizen!" He stopped nailing the shoe on the dun's hoof and looked up at Troy, the hoof still held in his hand. "Better men than you've tried to toss a rope on that filly. No soap. Better stay away, feller." But there was a sudden mellowness in his voice that puzzled Enoch.

Enoch Troy to figure where the big man spoke from bitter experience, or merely from observation.

"That young ranger feller Hawkins. Now there was a nice gent. You didn't see him tryin' any fancy ropin' around *Coyote Saloon.*" He didn't look up from his work this time. He rasped down the last hoof, put it to the ground, raised up and pulled off the smudgy rawhide apron.

"You can take it from Jumbo Bates, the smithy said, "it ain't atall healthy in Tinhorn with strangers askin' questions."

"Jumbo—why, you're—" Enoch caught his words. Possibly the big fellow didn't recognize him from last night, for undoubtedly this was the Jumbo to whose Flora Cowden had spoken as Troy was regaining consciousness.

- 2 -

ENOCH TROY mounted and rode leisurely down through town, his roan at a slow canter. The mount's hoofs made methodical little volcanoes of the snuff-like dust as it moved; Enoch smiled and nodded at anyone who stopped to look. He broke into a lonesome whistle as he neared the *Coyote Saloon,* for he wanted to be sure that the customers there saw him riding out of town.

He moved on to where the street seemingly tired of the whole thing and disintergrated into three or four trails. Troy took one and pulled his roan to a slow walk. He continued slowly until sundown. Then he halted at a branch lined with willows and luscious graze and allowed the roan to drink and nip the grass for half an hour. Then he mounted and headed back toward Tinhorn.

Something was poison in Tinhorn, all right. Whether it was Flora Cowden, as Jumbo had hinted, or went a lot deeper, he didn't know. Before he could bring the killer of Pete Hawkins to justice and clear up the two bank robberies, the stage-hold-ups and the unsolved murders around Tinhorn, he must find the core of the poison. The *Coyote,* his reasoning persisted, was the starting point. Not only was this Flora Cowden's joint, but all the monied men of the town gathered and silenced their thirst there. Here was the starting place, and as night's secretive cloak hid his movements, he headed the roan along the alley toward the rear of the *Coyote.*

And a question enlarged in his thoughts: Who else besides Flora Cowden knew he was a ranger. If Jumbo Bates knew it, he didn't indicate it during their talk. If Flora Cowden was really the head of the gang, of course her henchmen all knew and would be on the lookout for him. But he could not quite convince himself that she was all she had been painted by reports reaching headquarters.

He tied the zebra-dun to a mesquite limb in the alley and his eyes felt the way through the darkness toward the rear of the Coyote. Faint blades of light cut through cracks in the down-at-the-heel rear of the place and he headed toward them. His foot scraped a tin-can and the noise sounded like a shot in the silence of the alley. He hunkered down behind a boulder and waited. Silence continued, save the faint strains of a fiddle and a guitar, filtering from the *Coyote.*

He made it to the back wall of the saloon. Shafts of light framed a loosely-hung wooden door, and he tried it. It was not locked, and it whined a warning as it moved open on rusty hinges. After opening it, Enoch Troy lay flat against the wall for a minute, to see if the noise had aroused anyone. The music was louder now, and he was grateful for its deadening effect on his movements. He eased through the door into a sort of warehouse and junk-room, cut off from the main saloon and dance hall by a plank wall about ten feet high. Saloon night-sounds were loud now, and he moved with more assurance. He found a knothole in the partition and fixed one eye against it.

The three-piece band stopped playing and the drummer beat a tattoo. At the head of the stairs leading to an enclosed balcony, Flora Cowden paced. The immense hall echoed with the whistles of customers. She held a large ostrich-feathered fan back of her head, her white teeth sparkling in a stage smile. She filled a sleek red evening gown, with a slit up the side, exposing a shapely leg and a tantalizing garter set with sapphires sparkling like foxfire in the darkness.

She began to sing and walk down the stairs in slow, undulated steps. Her blonde hair glittered in the lamplight and Troy's heart pounded. But for those hard lines about her mouth, she would be a gorgeous woman. He wondered what man or men in her past had put those lines there. And then he abruptly quit wondering; that was none of his business.

HE STUDIED her every movement, her voice, the inflections and naughty inuendos. He began to understand the reports that had come to him of this woman saloon-keeper of boom-town Tinhorn. Yet, he couldn't quite picture her as a woman who could di-

rect cold-blooded murder. She might lead a man on with implied promises; and torment him with the lilt of her voice, until he would be better off dead. Yes, she could do that. Then laugh in his face. But murder? He watched her lithe body sway to the lilting song and wondered.

She finished her song and an encore. Then she walked to a table in the far corner of the floor and two men arose and one of them pulled her chair back for her.

One was short, heavy-built; and Enoch noticed that his head was permanently tilted slightly to one side on a short, red neck. He wore store clothes and a graying mustache.

That would be Jenkins, the general store owner, Enoch figured, judging from reports.

The other man should be Sheriff Dave Wert. Enoch saw in him a sixty-year-old, pot-bellied easy-going lawman. The sheriff, Enoch noticed, was hitting the bourbon heavily, while the merchant sipped at a mixture of something or other and watched Flora through puffed, half-closed eyes.

After a few minutes, he saw Flora suddenly get up, snap something to Horace Jenkins, then whirl on her heels and walk angrily up the stairs.

Five or ten minutes later, a sallow-faced skinny chap who looked possibly twenty-three or four hurried up to the bar. He said something to the bartender, then walk rapidly up the stairs. Enoch saw that he was the same man he followed up the stairs the night before, only to be knocked cold before he heard anything.

Troy heard some customer speak to him and call him Billy.

He tried to make a pattern out of what he had seen—the two men at the table, Flora's angered departure, and this boy.

Where did the boy fit? It couldn't be that—no, she couldn't fall for that type. Use him? Maybe.

Enoch remained at the knothole for an hour or longer, picking up bits of conversation here, a greeting there; trying to make a pattern out of what he saw and heard.

He had learned that the young man's name was Billy Sims; that his surmise about the identity of the men at the table had been right. They were Horace Jenkins and the sheriff, all right; and they were joined after Flora left by a man who fitted the description he had of Guy Link, the local banker.

He decided not to press his luck farther. He eased out of the room, opened the door, closed it quietly behind him and stood for a moment in the darkness to adjust his eyes to it. The noise of a blatant town came distantly to him; a coyote howled on a nearby hillside and far in the distance a rooster ventured to break the clatter of the town with his bantering crow. Enoch guessed it was near midnight.

He found his roan and rode back out to the brush and made camp by a murmuring branch.

ENOCH'S first intimation that something was wrong came when he saw Banker Guy Link run from the bank with his hands flying in the air yelling. At first, he couldn't make out what Link was screaming, because of the general street commotion. Enoch Troy had eased back to town and had just finished breakfast.

"Bank's been robbed ag'in!" he heard some man yell, as crowds ran toward the bank. Enoch joined them and when he saw Link, the florid-faced little man was wringing his handkerchief through his hands and yelling. "Again, they robbed me. In broad daylight. Get a posse!"

In a few minutes Sheriff Dave Wirt puffed up, his sides wheezing in and out like a sand-packed saddle-horse after a long gallop. "What's goin'

on here?" he demanded in an official tone.

"Again they robbed me!" the banker repeated. "In broad daylight!"

The sheriff fumbled around and pulled out a notebook and a short, stubby-pointed pencil. "Give me the facts," he said with a sigh. "How many men? What'd they look like? Which way'd they go? How much'd they get this time?"

The banker still rambled on excitedly. "Two, I think. No, maybe three. Yes, three of 'em. All wore masks. Slipped in through the back door. Went out the same way. Had me and the cashier covered before we knew anybody even was around. The bookkeeper too!"

Enoch Troy strained his ears to hear every word, without outwardly showing too much interest.

"One man was tall—about as tall as the stranger there." he waved *his* hand toward Troy, "Another was short and wore boots. The third—well, from where I lay on the floor, I couldn't see him very well."

Sheriff Wirt sighed again, closed his book and poked it back in his pocket. "All right, I deputize you—and you—and you—" He pointed out half dozen citizens. "Let's see what we can find."

Enoch melted into the crowd as it broke into smaller groups for post-mortems on the crime and still kept his ears open.

"Funny, how the gang knows when there's a payroll or a shipment of gold in the bank," one citizen remarked, shaking his head. "Funny thing. Today was Consolidated's payday. Money brought in maybe yesterday."

Enoch kept thinking over the vague descriptions given to the sheriff by the banker. And he was puzzled at the lawman's general attitude—like a sleepy man getting out of bed.

While these things were running through Troy's mind, Horace Jenkins, the general merchant, puffed up to one of the knots of men. "Was to breakfast when it happened. Just heard!" he exclaimed, his crooked neck seeming even more crooked than last night in the saloon. "Which way'd they go? How much did they get?" He shot a dozen questions at the men.

Jumbo Bates was among the group. He looked at the merchant for fully a second, then spat a stream of snuff-juice at an imaginary spittoon and walked away.

Enoch allowed the blacksmith to draw away from the group and then he followed him. Out of earshot of the others, he caught up with the big man.

"What about the robbery?" he asked the smithy. "What's your ideas?"

The big man looked at him queerly. "Time this town had a coyote-drive," he muttered. "Too dang many mangy wolves here wearin' men's clothes!" He shook his head and kept plodding.

He kept shaking his head from side to side. Now and then, Enoch saw the big man's fists close, and ripples moved along his powerful arms inside his sweat-soaked blue shirt.

THAT EVENING about sundown, the posse returned, empty-handed. "Clever gang." Sheriff Wirt muttered. "Tracks led into Culver Canyon, then scattered. Every set of tracks went in a different direction. First thing we know, we'd lost all of 'em." He sighed. "Well, maybe something'll turn up."

Even as the sheriff talked, Enoch Troy saw Jenkins, the merchant, pass and head briskly toward the *Coyote Saloon*. When he entered the establishment, Enoch was only a few yards behind him. Jenkins did not even slow down at the bar. He headed directly for the stairs leading to Flora Cowden's room. Enoch was grateful to the boisterous crowd already gathered, for apparently his presence was hardly noticed. When he followed the merchant, still nobody seemed to pay any atten-

tion. He experienced a glow of relief. Evidently Flora Cowden hadn't revealed his identity after all.

When Jenkins entered the door without knocking, Enoch climbed the stairs and pressed himself against the wall near the door, far enough back so that he could not be seen by the coward below.

"You've got a lot of nerve—rushing up here so soon!" Flora grated. "You might at least wait till things cool off. What's the matter? Don't you trust me?"

"In this sort of business," Jenkins' snapped, "I wouldn't trust my brother!"

"If he's anything like you, I don't blame you!" she shot back.

For a moment there was no sound in the room. Then the woman's voice again, almost plaintively: "This is the last time. Get that straight—the last time!"

"When *I* say, my dear. Remember—"

Suddenly thousands of stars burst into a brilliant galaxy in Enoch's head. There was no longer any voices. Only the clang of great symbols and the stars...

When he awoke with a suddenness, his hand went to a knot on his head the size of a prairie-chicken egg and he involuntarily groaned. "A mountain fell on me." He blinked his eyes, and at first only a blurry vision floated back and forth. The faint scent of perfume told him even before his eyes were able to focus, that he was in the woman's room.

"Looks like you'll never learn!" she snapped.

"One thing I know. I'm getting in a rut, Enoch said with more humor than he felt. "Conked on the head the same place twice. Can't say I object to my nurse, though," he grinned.

"Better thank me you're still alive."

"Thanks," Enoch mumbled.

She went to the door, cracked it and said in a loud whisper, "Maria, bring a wet towel—and the salve."

The fat Mexican woman wobbled in. A broad grin mapped her face. "Senor, he butt head on wall again, no?"

Flora wiped the clotted blood from a break in his scalp, then spread the salve over it. She folded the wet towel into a neat square pile and slapped it to the back of his head. "Now lie down on this!" she snapped.

Enoch lay down, closed his eyes momentarily, then looked up at her. "Why didn't you tell me you cared?" he grinned.

She seized a vase from the table, drew back. "Oh, hell! You're not worth it."

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TROY DOZED off, his head still throbbing. The sound of soft-moving feet caused him to open one eye a tiny slit. It was Flora tiptoeing out of the bedroom. He closed his eye again and listened. In an adjoining room—Enoch figured it was another bedroom—he heard whispers. He eased his feet off the couch and got up noiselessly. He crept to the closed door.

"Oh, you poor misguided fool!" he heard Flora moan. "If only you'd buck up and be a man!"

There was silence for nearly a minute, and Tim thought he detected quiet sobbing.

"But Flora, I told you! Once you're in, you're in. There ain't any out!" Enoch recognized the whining voice of Billy Sims, the youngster with the weak face, whom Enoch had seen go to Flora's rooms the night before.

"But can't you see what you've got

both of us into? Can't you realize that the longer you stay, the deeper we both are sucked in?" the woman reasoned, in much the tone of a mother reasoning with a wayward child. "You know I love you, Billy. You know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you. But don't take advantage of that!"

For some reason that Enoch didn't try to explain to himself, he felt anger rising. But that was like a woman of this sort—strong-willed and hard. She would fall for some gink exactly her opposite—someone to pamper when she was in the mood; someone she could kick around when she felt like it. Or maybe the youngster was her brother.

WHEN THE girl returned from her whispered meeting, Enoch Troy pretended to be asleep. She stood beside the sofa where he lay, and her presence there sent a feeling of strange elation through him. It probably was the faint scent of that rare perfume she wore, he told himself.

Finally he could stand her silence and her nearness no longer. He ventured a peek out of one half-opened eye. "I thought so!" she exclaimed. "Get up from there. We're going to talk!"

He sat up. He explored the knot and groaned when his hand touched it. He eyed her a long time. He grinned crookedly and started to speak, then thought better of it. Should he solicit her help? Or was she really the leader of a gang.

All he had found thus far in Tinhorn was a maze of riddles. How did Horace Jenkins fit into the picture? He obviously was tied up with Flora in some manner. And what about Sheriff Wirt? Was he in on the ring. too, or was he just an easy-going old-time lawman who believed in letting nature take its course? And young Sims?

Enoch stood up, towering above her nearly a foot. "I know; you advise me to pull tail. But suppose I stick round? Could I count on you for a little—well, information?"

She looked up at him and he saw a faint quiver on her lips. "I wish I could—help you," she said haltingly, turning her eyes from him. "But I can't. I can't! My hands are tied. I know you won't go; you're not the type. But please be careful!"

He caught her in his arms. And when he kissed her, she did not resist. When she finally looked up at him, there were tears in her eyes.

"You—you meddler!" she suddenly exclaimed, pounding her small fists against his chest. "Why did you have to ride into Tinhorn? Why couldn't you've stayed out of my life? I was getting along all right. Now—" She gestured hopelessly.

"Then you better help me clear up this mess. So Tinhorn will be safe for decent people."

"I told you; I can't. And stay away from me—and the *Coyote*. You're already under suspicion. Your coming here'll make it worse for both of us. See the sheriff; talk to Jumbo Bates—tell him I sent you. He's the—"

"The blacksmith," Enoch Tim put in. "Thanks." He turned and walked out, a seething within him. He was torn between anger and humility.

This woman was of the West's seamy side. In a way she was hard as nails. She had been a challenge to him the moment he saw her. To break that hard will, to dig beneath that outside garnish and reveal the real woman had been his burning desire from that first meeting.

Now she was ready to give herself to him, he knew. Her eyes shouted it, the warmth of her lips whispered it. And now a resentment swelled in him. At first she had been merely a challenge. He hadn't meant to win her love. And yet, there was a sense of elation at thought of those warm lips, that firm graceful body against his. It was a wine that sent his temples throb-

bing. Conflicting emotions battled without decision.

Then he thought of Billy Sims and cursed himself for a fool. That probably was her way of bending men to her will. Young Sims just didn't look right for Flora's brother; no, she was probably using Tinney, as now she hoped somehow to use Enoch Troy.

SHERIFF Dave Wirt sprawled back in his ancient swivel chair and lolled his legs across a home-made desk. "So Flora Cowden said to talk to me?" he commented, rolling a wad of Star Cut Plug around in his mouth.

He cut his eyes up at Enoch Troy as though too lazy to move his head. "I been watchin' you, Son. I' been 'a feared you was pokin' yore nose into Tinhorn's private business. You're a likeable sort, and I'd hate to see you get hurt.

"Now the way I see this robbin' and killin'—well, it's a natural part of any boom town. I've seen towns like this come and go for nigh onto forty years—all the way from Missouri City to Sante Fe. It's Nature a workin', Son. You can't buck Nature. Tryin' to stop this devilment in Tinhorn right now's like tryin' to tame a colt afore he's ripe for tamin'."

He aimed at the sandbox cuspidor in the corner and missed.

"Don't get me wrong; I'm not in cahoots with these varmints. On the other hand, I think I know who most of 'em are. They're pizen, Son. Now suppose I risked my hide tryin' to corral 'em? Chances are, I'll end up pushing daisies. They'd have to get another sheriff, and the same thing would be to do over ag'in. Nope, it don't make sense. No? I just believe in lettin' Nature take its course. It's healthier for everybody!"

A thin, angular man with a walrus mustache and stooped shoulders sauntered in and the sheriff introduced him as his deputy, Frank Knox. Knox lounged around a few minutes, during which Wirt changed the subject, then left.

"Now there's a man who'd like to see me fertilizin' the soil," Wirt said in a tired voice. "Leastwise, that's how it looks to me. Goin' to have to fire him, shore as shootin', though I hate to. Got a fine wife and three kids. They need his wages.

Enoch had seen Wirt's type before —honest, lazy and thinking more of his own safety than the welfare of his community. Somehow he couldn't bring himself to condemn the man, and yet he felt a certain contempt for him.

"How far would you go toward corraling this gang, if you had help?"

Wirt grinned sheepishly through his thick red beard. "As far as I'd have to."

"You may be called on sooner than you expect," Enoch said grimly.

JUMBO BATES raised up when he saw Enoch enter the blacksmith shop. He raised the handle of his bellows, wiped sweaty hands on his leather apron and mopped his brow. "Dun throw another shoe?" he asked, a semblance of a twinkle in his dull eyes.

"Miss Cowden sent me," Enoch said. "Hope you can tell me who's head of this gang."

Jumbo opened a tin box, pulled out his lower lip and dumped in a wad of snuff. He worked his lips to stir his dip. "If Mis' Flora says talk, I talk." His eyes gleamed at his own mention of her name, and Enoch thought he detected a note of reverence in his voice.

"I'm not supposed to know anything. You know," he chuckled in his high-pitched voice. "They say I'm sort of—well brainy like a jack-rabbit. They do a lot of talkin' when they think I don't have sense enough to lissen." He chuckled again.

"Tomorrow evenin' late, the Consolidated is gonna put four bags of

gold-dust in the bank safe, to keep till the next express wagon leaves for the East. About dark tomorrow watch for another raid on the bank."

In spite of Troy's prodding, that was all he could get out of Jumbo. "Talked too much already," the powerful man said. "And see you don't get Mis' Flora messed up in this!"

That night Enoch strolled down to the *Coyote* saloon. He told himself that he wanted to check up on some of the local characters, like Sheriff Wirt, Billy Sims, and Banker Guy Link. But he grinned to himself, knowing all the time that his main purpose was to see Flora Cowden and hear her sing.

When he entered, he noticed Horace Jenkins at the far end of the bar, talking to Pid Holler, the day-bartender who was now off duty. It seemed to Enoch that they behaved a little nervously after he entered. Pretty soon Pid left by the rear door.

While Enoch was nursing a swig of rye, Billy Sims walked furtively down the stairs from Flora's rooms, glanced at Jenkins and went on out.

The band was beating out a tear-jerker and a dark-haired girl sang an old cowboy ballad. The drinkers at the tables talked loud and cheered at the singer's every pause.

Then the drummer rolled his drums and all was momentarily quiet. Flora appeared at the top of the stairs in a close-fitting green evening dress and the customers rocked the rafters with their applause.

She began to sing as she walked slowly down the stairs, her steps atuned to the plaintive music.

"Go, my lover, go!" was a part of the chorus of the old western ballad. As she sang those words, she looked hard at Tim who lounged at the corner of the bar. He pretended not to notice how she looked at him, but the words sent a shiver up his spine. He knew she was trying to warn him.

As he stood there, fingering his glass and drinking in the beauty of the singer, his mind flashed back to Billy Sims. He could not get the chap out of his mind. And now he recalled that Sims went to Flora's rooms immediately after the bank robbery the day before...

IT WAS JUST a matter of finding a window open in the rear of the second-floor living quarters. By standing on the sill of the first floor window and tip-toeing, Enoch Troy was able to grasp the sill of the second window and pull himself up.

He sensed a feeling of guilt, rummaging through Flora's home like a thief. But the actions of young Sims had stirred a new suspicion. He must verify that suspicion or banish it.

In the slip of one of the large feather pillows on her bed he found it—a cache of gold. There were four large bags of it. It would be at least $25,000, Enoch guessed, about the amount that was supposed to have been taken in yesterday's bank raid!

He replaced the bags in the pillowcase and crept back through the window. He passed the front of the saloon as Flora finished her last song.

He was torn between anger and the feeling a man experiences when he knows a woman has made a goat of him. He realized now that he had been straining every point, all along, to give her the benefit of the doubt. He had taken with a grain of salt the earlier reports to headquarters which indicated but did not directly accuse Flora Cowden of heading up the gang. He had done a pretty good job of selling himself on her innocence. And she had made a sucker out of him!

He remembered that last kiss and unconsciously wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. That had been just another act in her game of hide-and-seek with the law. And it had seemed so warm, so real!

He had been walking slowly toward the hotel, without realizing just where

he was going or why. He saw a man lurking at the corner of a ramshackle store-building, but the man's presence did not register in his mind. He vaguely saw Jumbo Bates, the big blacksmith, walking slowly down the other side of the street. But none of these things actually registered, so deeply was he engrossed in thoughts of Flora Cowden and the gold he had found cached in her rooms.

Then he saw a movement so furtive that it brought him alertly to the present. A man ducked behind a building corner. At that same moment a gun roared from directly across the street. He felt the brush of the bullet pass his face.

Then the man he had seen dodge behind the building fired. This time he wasn't so lucky. He felt the sting of hot lead on his left forearm.

He dived behind a water-barrel, the nearest protection. A bullet thudded into the barrel and water gushed out.

He quickly realized that this position was precarious. Although it afforded some protection from the gunman behind the building, he was exposed to the fire from across the street.

He fired and heard his lead whine off the edge of the building. He turned to try a shot at the man across the street. He saw the searing flash of fire. Something thudded against his skull...

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HE LOOKED up and blinked his eyes. "Looks like," he groaned, "ending up in your room with a knot on my head's a habit."

Flora looked down at him. "You're lucky you didn't end up in boothill!" she growled. "You dumb brute! I told you today to leave town. I told you tonight, in my song. You knew I was warning you. You're the stubbornness man I ever saw!"

Enoch Troy touched the bandage on his head and groaned. Then he started to get up. Everything went black. It was several minutes before he opened his eyes again.

"I don't quite get it," he said. "Last thing I remembered, I was squatting behind a water-barrel, trying to hold back two gunmen. Then something hit me. Now I'm up here in your room—again." He raised to one elbow.

"You can thank Jumbo Bates that you're still breathing," she said fiercely. "He picked you up when the gunmen thought you were dead and brought you through the alley and up my back stairs. Nobody knows you're here. Otherwise, they'd probably be storming the joint now!"

For the first time, Enoch saw Jumbo sitting, ill at ease, in a chair in the corner of the room. "She told me to keep an eye on you, though," he added, grinning dully.

Enoch sat up and held his head between his hands. Now he noticed the short bandage around his left forearm.

"Another quarter of an inch and you'd been a dead rabbit," Flora said without feeling. "The bullet just parted your hair—and blamed near ruined your sombrero. It ploughed under the skin for about four inches, then broke out. Guess that skull's too thick for ordinary lead. Your arm's just burned a little."

Enoch stood up, with one hand to his head. He reeled a little and the room went black again. He sat back down and the throbbing diminished and his eyes cleared. He groaned.

"Well," he muttered. "I suppose I owe you and Jumbo my life. And you'll regret saving me. But dad-blame it, I was sent here to do a job. I'm sorry

you're mixed up in what I've got to do!"

He looked at her, his lips tight. "Blame it! Miss Cowden," he said with strained formality, "I searched your rooms tonight, while you were singing. I found something in a pillowcase—"

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened with a start. "I knew I was making a mistake—saving you," she muttered, but to Troy's surprise, her voice was without the bitterness and harshness he expected. Instead, she spoke as one resigned. "I don't mind telling you, I was mighty let down when I found that gold. Now is—"

She walked over and sat down on the couch beside him.

"Say the word, Mis' Flora, if'n I should put him to sleep!" Jumbo muttered from his chair in the corner.

"It's all right, Jumbo."

She looked straight at Enoch. Lines showed around her eyes, and torment burned there. "It's a nasty business. Yes, and I'm in it. It's like a bed of quick-sand. I've struggled to get out; every struggle sank me deeper. I don't think you can break the gang. It's bigger than you—bigger than all the law can muster in Tinhorn.

"But I'm tired of the torture, tired of fearing every stranger who walks Tinhorn streets—as I feared you. I'm tired of living in a shadow." She looked back at him again.

"I'm ready to throw in with you—win, lose or draw." She put out her hand. He accepted it, puzzled and awkward.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Enoch said shakily. "But I feel something pretty close-kin to a snake, tangling you up in it."

"Remember, Sonny Boy, I was tangled up long before you dropped your loop on Tinhorn."

"For your sake, I hope you had nothing to do with Pete Hawkins' murder!"

"LET'S CUT the bowing and scraping. Jumbo, I take it, has told you that another bank robbery is slated for around dark tomorrow. If you play your cards right—and get over that headscratch—there's an outside chance you can corral the gang. I'll know the layout before noon tomorrow, if Billy comes in. He—"

"Yeah," Enoch cut in, "that reminds me. What's this Billy to you?"

"A helluva lot, not that it's any of your business! Now keep your mind on the job at hand. You've guessed some of the members of the gang. But not all. Horace Jenkins is the brains. He's the man to watch—and to get."

Enoch Troy whistled at that revelation. He had figured that Horace ran the town, politically, but he didn't have him ear-marked for this. "After that, I won't be surprised at anything. Go on," he said animately.

"Pid Holler, my day barman, is a stooge for Horace. And why do I keep him here? Because Horace told me to! So watch Pid; he's itching to finish you off.

"And Guy Link—he's the cunning one of the whole shebang. He sets the stage for the robbery of his bank. You see, it's a natural setup. The loot the gang's been grabbing is not technically the bank's property, the bank merely holds it for safe-keeping. If it's stolen, it's no hair off Guy's back.

"And there's Sam Knox, sheriff's deputy, he heads the actual raids. He's also one of the hired killers. There is an assorted owlhoot gang of five or six lead-slingers who help out in the raids and work for goobers. Keep your eye on Horace Jenkins—that little pot-bellied skunk can shoot if he's cornered; and Pid Holler, Barton Link and Deputy Knox. I can

handle Billy Sims. Jumbo's on our side."

The big blacksmith looked up at mention of his name and grinned childishly. "Anything you say, Mis' Flora."

"Where's the sheriff stand?"

"He doesn't. He sits," Flora smiled. "He'd like to see the town cleaned up, but he'd prefer to sit it out in his rawhide-bottomed chair. He'll fight on our side if we force him. He's for law and order, if somebody will deliver it to him, all wrapped up in a pretty package."

Enoch shook his head. "On our side then we have you—and I never did put much stock in women's gunning—and a big-muscled man who might go off halfcocked when the going gets hot; and a sheriff who won't fight." He stood up and walked around a moment. "Pretty stiff odds."

"It's not quite that bad. I can muster two or three more men we can count. Maybe four or five."

"That's more like it. You know this talk about one riot, one ranger sounds mighty heroic—but, as for me, I've got an ambition to be pointed out as the state's oldest living ex-ranger!" He grinned and reached for his hat. "Well, that's settled. When'll I meet the rest of our bunch? We've got to work out the details."

"You're not going anywhere!" she snapped. "You think I've unburdened myself for nothing? Don't you know you wouldn't live ten minutes after you put foot on Tinhorn streets? They're scouring the town for you right now. Have been for hours—ever since Hawthorne, the undertaker, drove his wagon out to pick you up and didn't find you. There are a dozen guns cocked and waiting for you; you'll stay right here till we go after the gang."

THEY HAD come to Flora Cowden's upstairs home, one by one, inconspicuous but double-armed, these pitifully few men who believed in a decent town strongly enough to fight for it. There was John Blake, the cafe man; Hank Lowery, the livery-stable owner; Fingers White, the faro-dealer in Flora's saloon, and Sheriff Wirt, although the lawman was not told what was up until he had been lured into Flora's room and the door locked.

"Sheriff, you, Flora, Fingers and Jumbo stay here. Keep a weather eye through that window. You have a clear view of the rear of the bank. We'll be spotted here, and here, and he—" Enoch indicated positions in the shadows in the vicinity of the rear door to the bank. He directed various positions for the others.

"And Miss Cowden," Enoch grated with a tinge of sarcasm, "we'll try to keep your precious Billy from getting hurt!"

One by one the possemen moved out, walked down the secluded backstairs and faded into the gloom of the alley. By dusk, every man was in his designated position.

They waited only a few moments.

Out of the darkness silently rode eight men. Each wore a heavy mask. Three of them dismounted and handed their reins to the other riders.

Jenkins strode noiselessly to the door, lifted a latch and shoved. The door opened silently. He signalled the other two men to follow. The door closed behind them.

Troy's fingers itched. He counted the seconds. He must allow time for the three inside to get to the safe and as far away from the exit as possible. The seconds dragged like minutes.

Finally he signalled by stepping from around the corner of the shed. "Reach!" he commanded the lookouts.

The other members of the posse stepped out, their guns ready.

"Double-crossed!" Pid Holler shouted. He drew and fired at Troy; the bullet whined feet above Enoch's head.

The other four mounted lookouts leaped to the ground and slithered for cover. Bedlam broke, and there was firing in all directions.

Enoch got in a true shot and Pid groaned as he went down. One of the possemen was hit, but he dropped to his knees and kept firing.

Now another of the gang went down and lay still.

Enoch signalled his men to close in. They formed an inexorable ring of fire around the remaining three cornered men. One took a slug in the stomach. The other two tossed out their guns and raised their hands.

AS ENOCH TROY strode forward to take the men, a gun crashed from inside the bank. The bullet nipped his right leg. Enoch fired twice into the door, and he heard his lead whine off the metal-covered barricade. Two more shots spouted from the crack of the door.

Out of the corner of his eye Enoch caught a glimpse of a form slipping along the darkened wall of the *Coyote*, next to the bank.

He wheeled and sent a searching shot in that direction. The form answered back. One of his two bullets knocked his hat off; Enoch leveled again. Before he triggered a posseman's gun roared and the form sprawled forward.

Suddenly from the front of the bank, glaring in the street lamplight burst a slender form, no longer masked. Enoch recognized Billy Sims.

The boy's hands shot into the air as he dashed toward the entrance of the saloon. "Don't shoot! I quit!"

The final cry died on his lips. A burst of fire from the front on the bank caught him and he tumbled forward.

The firing had stopped at the rear of the bank. One of the three men who had entered was dead. Two more remained inside. One, possibly both, now was at the front. Enoch yelled for two of the possemen to cover the front. He leaped over and covered the two cowed lookouts.

"Come down and get 'em, Sheriff!" he yelled.

He waited restlessly for Wirt to appear. As he turned to face the approaching lawman, a rifle spat from Flora's window. Enoch heard the thud of a bullet behind him. He looked back.

Pid Holler's right arm was outstretched. A cocked six-gun was in his quivering hand.

"He was drawing on you!" Flora cried.

Enoch started on a run to the front of the bank, while the remaining men covered the rear. Halfway around, he heard three bursts of fire. When he reached the street, one of the inside men lay in the bank door, his gun still smoking.

The street by now was milling with *Coyote* customers and hangers-on. Flora and Fingers ran toward Enoch and the other possemen.

She dropped to her knees beside the still form of Billy Tinney. With a hoarse sob, she lifted the boy's head to her lap. "You poor boy! You poor, poor boy!" she sobbed. "If you'd only listened!"

She placed her jacket under his head and eased it back down, pulling a corner of it over his face. She got up and faced Enoch sternly, her chin quivering.

"I'm sorry," Troy muttered. "One of his own gang shot him from the bank. He was trying to cross over to our side."

"Yes, I know," she said softly. "If he'd only done that long ago."

THE POSSEMEN and Sheriff Wirt gathered up the bodies and the prisoners. The body along the wall of the saloon was Banker Guy Link. He apparently had heard the firing and was trying to join his fellow-outlaws. Everyone was accounted for but Horace Jenkins, they realized with sudden shock

"He's still in the bank!" Enoch yelled. One or two cover the rear. We'll rush him from the front!"

Followed by half the crowd, Enoch Troy and the sheriff and one of the possemen walked cautiously to the front door. As Troy was reaching for the latch, the door began to inch open.

The men fell back to the wall, their guns ready. "The game's up, Jenkins. Come out with your hands high!"

The door kept opening, slowly but methodically. A huge form finally appeared in the opening.

"Here he is!" laughed Jumbo Bates in his high-pitched voice.

He carried Horace Jenkins across his shoulder like a bag of feed. He pitched him to the dust at Enoch's feet.

The victim's eyes were on stems. His face was distorted and there was a blueness around his throat. Enoch glanced at Jumbo's huge hands, opening and closing, and for a brief second he felt sorry for Horace Jenkins.

"He was for me," Jumbo muttered. "He was abusin' Mis' Flora. It was my duty; nobody can mistreat Mis' Flora."

"I might have known," the woman said. "He broke away from us when the firing started—like a wild thing."

Enoch helped Fingers carry Billy to the porch on the opposite side from the *Coyote,* to wait the coming of the dead-wagon. Then he touched Flora's arm. "I'll help you to your room," he said gently.

"I belong with the other—prisoners," she sobbed. "Let's get it over with—all at once."

He ignored her words. He had talked to the sheriff an hour privately before the gun-battle. A lot of things had taken shape during that brief conversation. As they started into the *Coyote,* he motioned for the sheriff to turn his prisoners over to some of the possemen and follow him.

"Look, Miss Cowden," he said in an oddly emotional voice, when they were upstairs, "I know your part in this setup. You're not entirely innocent. The sheriff told how Horace Jenkins framed Billy Sims into being caught in the bank at night with a bag of gold in his hands—how he sent the boy to get the money for him and then planted a henchman posing as a ranger to capture him in the act. I know he did that to have something to hold over Sims' head, knowing he was weak.

"Then he threatened to expose Billy and turn him in for the attempted robbery unless you agreed to hold the loot in your rooms until the excitement of each robbery blew over. I know all that. But I still think you were a little weak yourself, to become embroiled, even to protect your—sweetheart. I can't—"

"Sweetheart? You talk like a man full of loco weed! Billy was my half-brother, the only living relative I had in the world. I would have died to protect him. I—"

"*Half*-brother!" It was an exclamation of relief. "Why didn't you tell me that this evening, Sheriff? It might—"

"Tell you? Hell, I'm as surprised as you are. I didn't know."

"Very few did," Flora went on. "Billy had been in trouble back East. He came here to start all over again, on his own. He wanted no favors from me, nor from anyone else because of

me; he asked me to keep the relationship a secret. Somehow, Horace Jenkins found out. That's how he was able to use me."

Enoch Troy got up and walked across the floor and back, his hand to his chin.

The sheriff yawned. "She ain't really done anybody harm; she had nothin' to do with any of the killin's. If Horace hadn't used her room to hide the gold, he'd found another place. I can't see any use—"

Enoch grinned. "I hoped you'd say that."

"Well, Miss Flora, looks like you're free. And out from under Horace Jenkins too. No more man-trouble for you," the Sheriff remarked with finality.

Enoch picked up his hat. "One more thing, Sheriff. Who you think murdered Pete Hawkins? I'd like to know he's paid in full."

"No doubt about it. Horace did that himself; I hear he bragged about it. "Course I didn't have any evidence."

"Good old Jumbo," Enoch muttered. "Well, I'll be seeing you around, folks."

Flora rose purposely. "There's one little detail you've overlooked, Mr. Ranger. I'm a stubborn woman." She allowed that to penetrate. "I know my men, too. And now, you stubborn galoot; if you don't ask me to marry you, then I'll...."

His mouth snapped open and he stood there, in a sort of delirious daze, for a second. Then he seized her in his arms and pressed her lips for a long time.

"You'll have to excuse us, Sheriff," he grinned.

"Dave, you've been after me to sell you the *Coyote,* so you could retire and buy your red-eye wholesale. She's all yours. Draw up the papers. I'm trailing along with this saddle-bum, and I don't give a hoot where he leads me."

★

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A dead man greeted Eli Burns as he rode into the town beyond Hawk Pass. And when he saw the man called Payfer, Burns knew the setup.

THE CORPSE SAYS "WELCOME!"

Novelet of Boothill Mystery

by Ed Keller

IT HAD BEEN as hot a day as any he could recall, a seemingly unending day, too, and Eli Burns heat-wearied, was almost willing to believe that it would never end, that darkness and the usual night breezes would never come.

He glanced at the western sky, frowned and shook his head; the horizon was a crimson-tinged backdrop, in front of which the setting sun, a huge ball of darting flame, had perched itself.

The big black horse was sweat-drenched too, but he toiled on doggedly, snorting loudly every now and then, voicing his dislike for the intense and muggy heat.

Then suddenly they were atop the crest of the slope and the black panted to a full halt.

Burns eyes closed, slumped forward in the saddle. He raised his left hand with an evident effort, groped for his hat, reached it and took it off, crushed it to him against the saddle horn.

A vagrant breeze drifted by aimlessly and curiously enough, halted there. Both man and horse were grateful for it; they were motionless in its presence as though they feared that any movement on their part would frighten it away. For a brief moment it whipped about them, then it was gone. Burns sighed deeply, opened his eyes reluctantly.

There was a narrow canyon directly ahead of them. Sun-faded, sun-bleached walls, towered high into the cloudless sky. A trail wound through them; in the not too far off distance it dipped down sharply and abruptly, seeming to disappear into space. The ground itself was shale and stone, completely devoid of grass.

The black stirred himself presently and plodded away again; the metallic clatter of his iron shoes on the walled passageway. A chiseled figure on one wall caught Burns' eye; he drew rein when he came abreast of it and twisted around in the saddle to stare at it. The figure was that of a bird in full winged flight. On the opposite wall was a brief caption...Hawk Pass.

They rode through it slowly, minutes

The girl dropped to her knees beside the fallen man . . .

later emerging into the open again. The black halted mechanically.

A new, green world lay outstretched before them, a world that was a rolling carpet of thick, lush grass, its expanse limited only to the range of the eye. A ribbon of a road wound through the greensward and the big horse plodded off and swung onto it.

IT WAS probably an hour later. . . the sun had now disappeared from view. Burns spied a town a mile or so away. Instinctively the black lengthened his stride; somehow he had sensed the nearness of rest, of food and drink, too. Swiftly now they swept over the road.

Burns checked the black's pace when they came thundering up to the entrance to the town. . . the road simply widened into a single street that ran the length of the town. . . slowed him first to a canter, then to a mere jog when they swung into the street. Strangely enough, and Burns', face reflected his surprise, the street was deserted. Suddenly the big horse snorted, jerked to a stiff-legged, quivering halt.

In the very middle of the street, face downward in the wheel-rutted gutter, lay a man. His arms were outflung; a Colt lay inches beyond his right hand. A hat, evidently his too, had spun to a halt against the wooden curb. Burns, probing eyes ranged the length of the hushed street. It was a typical Western town, drab and sun-baked. With two notable exceptions, because they dwarfed the others so completely, the town's buildings were ordinary, one-story high structures, most of them hardly more or better than shacks;

midway along the street, on opposite sides, and almost directly across from each other, were the exceptions, two two-story high, verandaed buildings. In common with even the smallest shack on the street both of these buildings were sadly in need of painting.

There was a big sign above the first of the two larger structures. It read, *Trail's End Cafe;* below the name, in considerably smaller-sized letters was a barely discernible word...*Accommodations.* The building opposite it had a faded, windwhipped banner stretched loosely across the windows of its upper floor, Hawk Hotel.

There were probably six or eight cafes and saloons along the street, some of them next door to one another... in most Western towns the cafes featured entertainment of one sort or another; the saloons were simply saloons with only one type of entertainment offered...fights between the patrons. A hurried first glance usually gave one the impression that drinking 'parlors' dominated the town's business activities and outnumbered 'legitmate' businesses by a wide margin; a second glance confirmed it. However Burns soon spotted the usual "General Store" and the equally usual "Barber-Undertaker's." A bit further down the street was a drab-looking place with a huge sign above it that read, simply and eloquently, *Eat;* just beyond it was a small store across whose dirty window was a brief legend...*Bank.* A closer look revealed that the "Bank" was vacant.

ALMOST directly abreast of where the black had halted so abruptly was a somewhat larger store with double windows. The words, *The Westerner,* formed of huge block letters, had once been pasted on them; curiously, the *W* had since disappeared, leaving nothing but the black outline of the letter on the pane. There was a line-bordered placard leaning against one of the windows...*'the most widely-read newspaper in town',* it read. At the bottom was a single line... Clyde Hurton, *Publisher and Editor.*

The door of the newspaper office was suddenly opened and a pudgy bald-headed man emerged. He looked up, stared hard at Eli Burns, glanced at the man lying so still in the gutter, shook his head and turned away again. Presently the door slammed behind him. Burns frowned. "Sociable town," he muttered.

He nudged the black with his knees and the big horse snorted protestingly; Burns jerked the reins sharply and the black started forward again, reluctantly, judging by his rather hesitant pace.

There was a sudden rush of pounding hoofs, the shrill, rasping grinding of wagon brakes...Burns twisted around in the saddle and looked back. A team of galloping horses came thundering onto the street, then a careening light farm wagon swung around behind them. Quickly Burns backed the big horse against the curb. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a young, white-faced girl on the wide seat of the wagon as it flashed past him. Men suddenly appeared in the doorways along the street...the pudgy man reappeared in the doorway of *The Westerner.*

The girl seemed to rise up, toss the reins away and leap out of the wagon even before it ground to a full stop. She stumbled and almost fell, steadied herself somehow and plunged forward toward the sprawled figure in the gutter and dropped to her knees beside him. A great sob broke from her. There was no movement among the men in the doorways. Burns glanced mechanically in the direction of the newspaper office.

The pudgy man shook his head, trudged into the gutter and bent over the sobbing girl. He talked to her for a moment, quietly, then he straightened up, turned and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Willie!" he yelled.

A middle-aged Chinese with slip-

pered feet and a startled look on his mild, bland face emerged from the newspaper office.

"C'mere!"

Willie waddled forward. The pudgy man...Burns had already decided that he was Hurton...bent over the girl again. This time he lifted her to her feet. She clung to him for a moment, sobbing against his shirt front. He patted her shoulder awkwardly, then he held her off at arm's length. She turned away from him slowly, her head bowed. He montioned quickly to the Chinese; together they bent over the dead man. Clumsily they tried to lift him. Burns dismounted, hitched up his sagging gun belt and strode forward. "Mebbe I can manage it," he said simply.

HE BENT down, turned the dead man over on his back, sat him up, steadied him with one hand, then, with a sudden movement swung him up and over his shoulder. He straightened up, shifted his burden a bit, marched to the wagon, circled to the rear. There was ample floor space behind the seat; Hurton stepped forward quickly and slid the seat farther down toward the front of the wagon. Carefully, Eli Burns lowered the dead man to the floor. There was a blanket beneath the seat and Hurton snatched it up and spread it over the limp body. He looked up and caught Burns eye.

"Thanks, Stranger," he said.

Burns nodded, turned and tramped back to the waiting black. Willie picked up the dead man's hat, reached down for the gun that lay in the gutter when the girl suddenly pushed past him, snatched it up herself. Her face was grim and deathly white. Hurton blinked, stepped quickly to her side.

"Now, Ginny," he began, swallowed and held out his hand for the gun.

The girl shook her head. "No," she said determinedly.

She looked past him, across the street at a group of men who were standing in the doorway of a saloon. The name *Curley's* was painted on the window in white letters. The girl's eyes blazed with a sudden fierceness and her lips thinned into a straight line. Hurton eyes followed hers. She pushed past him suddenly, strode swiftly across the street, stepped onto the wooden sidwalk and halted directly in front of *Curley's*. She shifted the gun in her hand, tightened her grip on it.

"One of you tell Payfer to come out here," Burns heard her say bitingly to the men in the doorway. "If he doesn't, I'll go in after him!"

Hurton panted up to her. "Ginny!" he said quickly. "You can't..."

She pushed him away. "I can—and I will!"

There was a sudden movement inside the shadow-darkened saloon and a big, red-faced man shouldered his way through the group standing in the doorway. He halted in front of the girl, hands on hips, and looked down at her.

"Yeah?" he said tauntingly, "You'll what?"

"Get out of my way," she said through her teeth. "You—you swine!"

The man's face clouded. "Hurton," he blurted out. "Take 'er th' hell away fr'm here! No punk kid's gonna shoot off 'er mouth t' me an' get away with it! G'wan, take 'er away, y'here... b'fore she gets hurt!"

- 2 -

THERE WAS a nervous helplessness in Hurton's paled face, a fear-fostered appeal to the girl in his quick, sidelong glance. He turned to her, evidently to beg her to come away with him...anticipating it, she turned her back before he could speak. He gulped painfully; he almost choked when someone bumped him and shouldered him aside.

"Just a minute," he heard a voice say.

He looked up quickly. His eyes widened...it was the tall, black clad man.

Eli Burns had halted a step in front of the girl; he glanced at her as though to reassure her, then he turned and faced the red-faced man. Their eyes met and clashed.

"What d'you want?"

"Your name Walker?"

"Who wants t' know?"

"I do," Burns answered calmly, " 'cause if it is then this is one killin' nobody's gonna blame you for."

"What d'yuh mean?"

"We-ll," Burns went on easily, "that fella in the wagon was drilled plumb center...through the heart. From what I've heard tell 'bout you, Walker, your spec'alty is shootin' folks through the back, so that leaves you in the clear. Hold it... don't reach for your gun. You might be sorry for it later on. Now what I was leadin' up to, Walker...this killin' looks like some o' Payfer's handiwork. Heard you two'd teamed up. Where is he?"

"S-ay....who in hell're you?"

"The name's Eli Burns. Ever mentioned it? N-o? that's surprisin'. Still, I don't s'ppose it makes much diff'rence ....you'll get to know all about me pronto, by y'slf, too. Here....one o' you hellions trot back inside and tell 'im to make it snappy!"

There was no movement, no sound save a light, forced cough by one of the men. Burns frowned. His hands dropped suddenly toward the jutting butts of his low-slung guns. A dozen eyes trying to follow the downward sweep of his hands, lost themselves somewhere and when they refocused themselves again, they found the muzzles of the guns they hadn't actually seen drawn gaping at them. The twin Colts seemed to have leaped out of their holsters to meet his hands.

Experience had made them gunwise; in that incredulous, lightning draw they saw the mark of the craftsman and they hastened to obey the menacing threat of his tools. In the hands of a novice guns were only a bluff; in the hands of an expert they were purposeful, uncompromising and all-commanding.

Fearful lest he misinterpret their unconscious hooking of their thumbs in their gunbelts there was a hasty, awkward jerking away of their hands. A couple of men, now eager to obey him, wheeled so suddenly they collided with one another. There was a brief exchange of angry, glowering looks; one man finally shouldered his mate aside and bolted into the saloon.

BURNS RELAXED. He glanced at Walker but the red-faced man made no move; he seemed completely subdued now, even appeared to be accepting with a fair degree of good grace the fact that the black clad man had cowed and humbled him. He even seemed content to limit his resentment to a glare, and Burns, with more important business awaiting his undivided attention, offered no objection to that. Walker, together with most of the others, accepted without protest the secondary roles, those of mere spectators and they watched and awaited with unconcealed interest the appearance of Payfer.

Burns turned toward the girl. He holstered one of his guns and held out his empty hand to her. "Reckon you'd better let me take care o' that," he said quietly.

Their eyes met for the briefest moment. Ginny handed him the gun without a word. He took it gravely, shoved it into his belt; he looked up quickly when he heard a heavy, unhurried step just inside the saloon.

The men standing in the doorway turned their heads...they stepped aside when a big man appeared and halted on the threshhold. He was broad

and handsome and well-dressed... over-dressed for his surroundings, Burns decided after a quick, appraising look at him. There was a slight bulge beneath the left shoulder of his well-tailered coat; a casual observer might not have noticed it. Burns practiced eyes took prompt note of it...the tell-tale sign of a shoulder holster. If Payfer recognized the black clad man his face gave no indication of it.

"Well, well!" Burns said gaily. "Mister Payfer himself! And lookin' like a million, too! Been doin' all right for yourself, eh, Payfer?"

He grinned but those nearest him noticed that despite his apparent good humor he did not lower his gun; instead the yawning muzzle of the big Colt appeared to rise, perhaps the barest bit, until it was on a line with the middle button of Payfer's coat.

"Bet you never expected t' see me again, did you, Payfer?" he asked. "That's what you get for not finishin' me off when you had the chance to. You should've known that half a job o' killin' wouldn't do for me...most anybody a' tall could've told you that I was three-quarters mule and one-quarter pure cussedness and that I wasn't the kind that'd cash in without puttin' up a fight.

"Oh, well...I don't s'ppose there's any sense in rubbin' it into you 'specially when it's your hard luck and my good luck that I'm still alive. S'ppose then we kinda forget it and move on to new bus'ness? All right?"

There was no reply from Payfer, no comment. Burns paused a moment; finally he arched his eyebrows in pretended surprise. "Nothing t' say?" he asked. "S'matter...lose your tongue?"

AS THOUGH in answer to Eli Burns' taunt, Payfer's tongue did appear, and at that very moment; only the tip of it however and not to refute Burns but to moisten the big man's suddenly parched lips. Burns, watching, grinned again; in an instant the grin vanished and his eyes were cold and steely.

"Payfer," he began again presently amid a hushed silence, evidence that everyone was listening. "I don't know why you killed that feller," he jerked his head toward the wagon in the middle of the street, "but whatever your reason was for doin' it, I'll bet it all began with him havin' somethin' you wanted and couldn't get. We-ll everything has to have a beginnin' they say and that holds good for you, too... for the first time in your life you're caught dead to rights and for once you're gonna hafta pay for what you've done, and pay through the nose, too."

Burns paused again. He drew a deep breath, then he went on. " 'Course, bein' that I ain't the law, the punishment won't be what the law'd hand out to you; still the result'll be 'bout the same and that's what I'm interested in. I don't halfta tell you that I've been waitin' a long time for a chance to make you sweat blood and now that I've fin'lly caught up with you I'm gonna make you pay, not only for what you did to me, but for what you did to that other feller, too. I'm gonna plague you to death, Payfer...I'm gonna dog yo 'till you draw, then I'm gonna kill you!"

He snapped his leveled gun upward holstered it with what appeared to be part of the same movement. "I'm gonna give you a break, Payfer," he said as an afterthought. "You can save y'self a heap of trouble by reachin' for your gun now and gettin' this thing over with pronto. I won't draw 'till your gun's clear o' your holster. That's a heap better break'n you d'serve, a better break'n you ever gave 'nybody, We-ll, what d'you say? Are you game?"

There was no response from Payfer. There was no movement of the big man's hands or body, nothing but a nervous moistening of his lips.

"Uh-huh," Burns said coldly. "That's just about what I figgered your an-

swer'd be. When the chips are down you ain't any braver'n any o' the other killers I've run up against. Gotta have all the odds in your favor or you don't play your hand. Awright then, Payfer get this. Be gone when I get back here."

He wheeled, took the girl's arm and led her to the wagon. He helped her climb aboard, waited until she had seated herself then he swung himself up beside her and caught up the reins. He turned his head just once, shot a glance at Walker and then at Payfer. Neither man had moved. Burns released the brake, jerked the reins. The wagon rolled away. It jounced a bit when a rear wheel failed to clear a deep rut completely.

Hostile eyes followed them, saw the wagon halt in front of the undertaker's shop, saw Burns alight and stride into the place; they saw him again presently when he emerged, followed by two men who removed the blanketed body from the rear of the wagon. When they had carried it inside Burns returned to his seat beside the girl. Presently the wagon came clattering up the street again. It rumbled past *Curley's* and headed out of town.

The black, fearing that he had been forgotten, whinnied shrilly, but at that very moment Burns twisted around and whistled. The big horse whirled like a flash and thundered away after them. He tore over the ground like a runaway locomotive. Swiftly he overtook them and ranged himself alongside the wagon. Then the road wound sharply away from town, northward, and the men who were still idling in the doorway of *Curley's* lost sight of them.

THE LENGTHENING shadows deepened, veiling everything earthly and presently, a gradual yet surprisingly swift transition, it was night. The sky was vacant and colorless for a moment; the next moment it was aglow with soft, silvery light as a bright moon appeared, then quickly, daring, twinkling stars studded the sky. Eli Burns jerked the reins; he slowed the galloping horses to a trot, then to a mere jog. The black, well trained and alert, needed no command. Ever matchful he slackened his pace when the other horses checked theirs.

Burns glanced at the girl who sat beside him. There had been no conversation; he was glad that she had stopped sobbing. Now she was distantly silent and motionless.

"Mind if I ask you somethin'?" he began.

She stirred, straightened up. "No," she answered with surprising readiness. Her voice however was dull, almost toneless.

"D'you know what that was all about?"

"You mean the...the shooting?"

"Yeah."

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

He was silent for a moment. "What's the rest o' your name?" he asked. "B'sides Ginny, I mean."

"It's Stevens. My Uncle was John Stevens."

"Oh," he said, surprise in his voice. "Your Uncle, eh?"

"Yes. Actually he was more like a father to me. I don't think my own father could have been any kinder."

"That so?"

He frowned in thought for a moment or two, staring off into dark space, then he turned to her again. "Look, Ginny...your Uncle ever have 'ny bus'ness dealin's with Payfer?"

"No-o, none that I know of. However, Payfer came to see him twice. Each time though he went off in a huff."

"Uh-huh. What'd Payfer want of him?"

"I don't know. You see, Uncle John wasn't a very talkative person. I asked him what Payfer wanted the first time he came but he just smiled, told me it wasn't important and told me to forget it."

"I see. What about this Horton?"

"Clyde Horton?", she repeated in surprise. "What do you mean—'what about him'?"

"We-ll, for one thing...how'd he and your Uncle get along? Friendlylike?"

"Oh, yes," she said quickly. "They were very friendly."

He was disappointed in the little he had learned from her and he frowned again.

"Don't know that I'd trust him too far," he said with finality.

She turned toward him....in the night light he could feel her eyes probing his face. She sat back again presently. "Oh, I don't know," she said and he thought her tone was a bit sharp.

"Got 'ny folks around here?"

"No, not around here...in Larkin."

"Where's that?"

"South...about a hundred and ten miles, I believe it is."

"Got 'ny friends any nearer?"

"Yes, the Carters. They live fairly close by," she answered and looked at him again. "Why do you ask?"

"How d'we get t' their place?"

"We turn right, that is north, when we reach the cross roads. But why... why are you so interested in knowing about them?"

"You're gonna spend the night at their place," he said simply.

"I am? Why?"

"We-ll, I got 'n idea that Payfer killed your Uncle because he had somethin' that Payfer wanted, and wanted bad. 'Course I admit it's only an idea, but the way I see it that must've been the reason for the killing. With your Uncle out o' the way Payfer's next move is t' look for the thing he wanted. Where'll he hope to find it? That's easy, Ginny....he knows the only place your Uncle would've hidden it away is at home. Right? 'Course. Now when he comes a-lookin' I don't think you ought to be there. There's liable to be some excitement. Understand?"

"Y-yes, but...." she glanced at him again, finally nodded. "Whatever you say."

"That's the idea."

He settled himself in the long seat, tightened his grip on the reins.

"Oh, yeah," he said without turning his head. "Don't forget to let me know where we turn off."

- 3 -

ELI BURNS had found a lantern standing in a far corner of the pantry, a closet-sized cubicle just off the kitchen. A torn but neatly folded half of a burlap bag that lay on a chair was promptly snatched up and pressed into service; he draped it over the lantern in an effort to dim the light, prevent its being seen by anyone outside the house, and lastly, to divert it completely to the floor. But he soon decided that he could do with even less light, hence, to safeguard himself against even the remotest possibilty of detection, he turned down the wick until only the tiniest light remained.

Now, lantern in hand, he started through the silent house, swiftly and purposefully. He was confident that the clue to John Stevens' killing, the cause of it, was somewhere in the house but just where it was hidden, what form it would appear in, or what it might consist of, he hadn't attempted as yet to figure out.

Certain too that Payfer would lose no time in instituting a search for what he had willingly killed in order to obtain, and realizing that time was the all-important factor in his favor at the moment, Burns agreed that his own search would have to be a hurried one if he wished to avoid being "interrupted." He passed by what appeared to him to be the usual and the all too ob-

vious hiding-places; instead he sought out those few places of concealment that another but equally-hurried seeker would fail to notice.

He devoted but little time to the kitchen, made his way into the parlor and actually began his search there. A long ridge in the wall...it ran evenly from ceiling almost to the floor... caught his eye. He probed it carefully, tapping the surrounding area with his knuckles, looking hopefully for a hollow spot in the wall, perhaps a secret panel. He frowned and looked disappointed when the ridge proved to be nothing more than just a ridge. He pushed a desk away from the opposite wall, looked behind the desk rather than inside of it; there were two framed and considerably faded pictures on the wall and he took them down and examined them carefully, probing behind the paper backing; but his efforts failed to uncover anything.

He rehung the pictures and moved on to the dining room, an orderly and probably seldom used room. He halted in the open doorway. His eyes ranged over it, up and down the walls. Then, unwilling to take too much for granted, he trudged around the room, touching this and that, looking here and there, behind the furniture and under it. He came to a halt, finally, in the very middle of the room, and scratched his head.

"We-ll," he muttered. "If what Payfer hopes to find in this house is here, then I'm doggoned if I know where to look for it."

He put down the lantern, glared at the tiny circle of light around its base. He looked away presently.

"Let's see now," he began shortly. "Let's figger the whole thing out. If I was Payfer, and I was plottin' t' kill somebody, what would be a good reason for wantin' to do it? Answer....that somebody'd have to have something I wanted. All right now what could John Stevens have had that Payfer could've wanted? Land? Nope, Stevens' spread ain't big enough t' make anybody jealous. Money? I don't think so, 'less.... why, doggone it, why didn't I think o' that sooner? Why couldn't it've been gold that Stevens had and Payfer wanted? 'Course it could, and more'n likely it was!"

HE WAS SO elated, he fairly bristled with excitement. But he calmed himself again in another moment and continued his reconstruction of motive and crime.

"All right," he said briskly. "Let's say it was gold. If it was then that means that Stevens was mining it. 'Course Payfer found out about the mine...that's plain as day and no argument...and how he found out about it ain't important right now 'cause it tells me what he wanted of Stevens.... he musta tried to barge into the ownership of the mine; failin' in that his next best bet was to try to get Stevens to sell 'im even a piece o' the mine.

"That'd be the Payfer way, all right ....let him buy the tiniest piece and the next thing you know, he'll be ownin' the whole damned thing by himself.

Eli Burns paused to think over his deductions. When he was satisfied in his own mind that he was on the right track, he continued.

"Yeah, the more I think of it, the more certain I am that I've hit on it. And now that I think of what Ginny said about Payfer stalkin' off in a huff both times he came to see Stevens, why, heck, there can't be any doubt about it. We-ll, let's go on. Stevens was probably a smart one, too. But he figgered right from the b'ginning, that is, once he knew what was on Payfer's mind, that he'd have to watch his step. I'll bet Payfer and that Walker polecat trailed Stevens every time he stepped outside this house, but from the looks o' things, Stevens musta outsmarted 'em. He musta managed to give 'em the slip every time.

"Then too, so's to keep 'em guessin'. I'll bet he only worked the mine just once in a while, 'stead of every chance

he got. He'd prob'bly take just a little dust t'day and mebbe not again for a week. Oh, he musta been smart or Payfer would've been ownin' the mine soon's he found out about there bein' one."

He nodded to himself. He moistened his lips with his tongue, then he went on again.

"Now then, how'd Payfer come to find out about the mine anyway? 'Course it wasn't from Stevens that he heard about it. Ginny said her Uncle was closemouthed so Payfer musta gotten wind of it from somebody else. Awright....who? My first guess'd be Hurton. And it adds up, too. He and Stevens were friends and even if Stevens wasn't the kind to talk it was only human for him to confide in somebody....if not in his own niece, then in somebody else just as close to him ....a good friend. Yep, and that friend couldn't've been anybody else but Hurton. That's that."

He found himself staring hard at a board in the floor. Somehow, despite his efforts to shift his gaze, his eyes continually returned to it. He frowned, turned his head.

"If I'm right about this bus'ness," he began again presently, "then the thing Payfer's after is a map of Stevens' mine."

UNCONSCIOUSLY, Eli Burns had turned again and his eyes had returned to the board. There was something about it that held them, something that made it stand out among the other boards despite the fact that they were equal in length and width and fairly identical in color. But now his curiosity demanded that it be satisfied...he caught up the lantern and strode forward, halted beside the board and knelt down. He moved the lantern along the edge of the board, then back again.

Something caught his eye; there was something different about this board—there were tiny notches at one corner. He twisted away, examined some of the other boards. He shook his head finally. Perhaps he had found something—there weren't any notches in any of the other boards.

He put the lantern down beside him, brought it a bit closer, then he whipped out his knife. He inserted the tip of the blade into one of the notches and using the handle as a lever, pressed down on it. His eyes widened—the board moved the barest bit, lifted a little, too. Quickly he repeated the performance, shifting however to another notch farther down along the edge of the board. This time he drove the blade deeper into the notch, pressed down harder too. The end of the board suddenly popped up and quivered to a stop some six inches above the floor itself.

He jerked back in surprise, stared hard at it.

"Well what d'you know about that?" he muttered in an awed tone.

He sheathed his knife, bent down and peered under the board which was still quivering. There was something under it, something white and square, like a sheet of paper. His eyes widened —it was a sheet of paper. His arm shot out. His long, eager fingers snatched it out. He squatted down on the floor, brought the lantern even closer. The paper was folded in half ...one edge of it was ragged and torn. Quickly he unfolded it, spread it out under the lantern. It was a map and he grinned happily. He had been right all along and confirmation of his deductions elated him. His eyes ranged over the map.

"Uh-huh," he muttered. "This is it, all right. But wait a minute—this ain't all of it, can't be. A map's s'pposed to show a layout of a place but it's sipposed to show you how to get there, too! All this shows is the layout —there's a tree, those things are s'pposed to be rocks I guess, and that thing in the corner—I don't know

what that is 'less it's the entrance to the mine. But where is this place? How d'you get there? Doggone the luck—to make any sense outta this I'll have to go find the piece that's been torn off!"

He jerked his head up suddenly and listened. He had left the black just outside the back door; he had posted him there, within immediate reach, in case he found it necessary to make a sudden departure. There was a second reason, too— Burns had long since discovered that the big horse was a dependable sentinel. He could detect the approach of either man or horse long before anyone else could, regardless too of the stealth the approacher might employ, Burns listened for still another minute; when the minute passed and he heard no sound from without, he relaxed.

He climbed to his feet put the map into his shirt pocket and buttoned the flap securely. He stamped on the pried-up board until he managed to force it back into place. He froze suddenly, when he heard something, waited expectantly for the black's whinny, the big horse's only means of sounding a warning.

Seconds passed then it came, clear and sharp and compelling.

Burns caught up the lantern, ripped off the burlap covering and tossed it aside; with a single motion he turned out the light and cast the lantern away. He heard it roll across the floor, heard it collide with the leg of a chair, heard the glass shade shatter.

HE LUNGED through the darkened parlor, fortunately without mishap, then into the kitchen. He brushed against a chair and nimbly jerked himself away from it, grazed the table and finally reached the back door. He flung it open and bolted out, halted almost immediately in his tracks, turned and pulled the door shut. The black came forward out of the shadows to meet him. Eli Burns swung himself up into the saddle, spurred the big horse and sent him bounding away.

Tall trees loomed up ahead, probably some fifty feet away, and Burns, seeking their protection, headed the black toward them. The big horse skimmed over the ground, came thundering up to them, slid to a halt. Burns turned him around, backed him quickly into the protective shadows of overhanging branches. Now he could hear a rumble somewhere in the immediate distance. He recognized it presently—it dissolved as it approached into a pounding of galloping hoofs.

The clatter swelled until it reached its highest pitch—it fell away when the shadowy figures of mounted men burst into view. There were six, seven, eight of them. They pulled up a short distance from the house and gathered around the lead rider evidently for a hasty, last-minute discussion before the attack was actually launched.

The discussion was a brief one; they wheeled their horses away, fell in, one behind the other, swerved away a bit from the house, then the troop came on, swinging around it at a full gallop with men spaced at fairly even distances from one another. Presently the house was completely encircled and the horsemen reined in again.

Burns saw the nearest riders swing out of their saddles. Moonlight ran along the barrels of their rifles. There was a moment's delay. Burns wondered about it, then the resounding whack of a man's open hand on his rump carried across the intervening space. The attacker's horses clattered away in a body. There was a sudden and hushed stillness.

"Burns!" a deep-throated voice cried. Eli recognized it at once—it was Walker's. "You're surrounded. Now come outta there, y'hear?—an' come out with yore hands high!"

"Polecat!" Burns muttered scornfully.

There was a minute's wait.

"All right!" he heard Walker boom.

"If that's the way yuh want it, that's the way it's gonna be! Pour it into him, boys!"

Flame and thunder belched from the encircling rifles, volley after volley, until the din was deafening. A window smashed before the shattering impact of a bullet, then a second, even a third window was blasted out of its frame.

"Hope they're enjoyin' themselves," Burns muttered. Anger and resentment welled up within him. For a moment his hands curled tightly around his own gun butts. It would have been a simple matter for him to jerk out his Colts and cut down the attackers nearest him, but he bridled his temper, realizing that disposing of a couple of Payfer's men would avail him nothing. He tightened his grip on the reins and the black's head jerked up.

"Reckon we might's well hightail it away from here, Boy. There ain't much sense in our waitin' around—we've got what they're after so they've got their work cut out for themselves if they expect to find somethin' that ain't there. We'll just take advantage of their busyness and go callin'. No tellin' when we'll have another chance as good as this one, y'know."

The big horse snorted in agreement. Burns wheeled him. He leaned forward and patted the sleek neck. Silently, as though he sensed the need for it, the black plodded away through the shadow-shrouded trees. Burns twisted around and looked back.

"Huh!" he snorted and scorn sharpened his tone. "Look at 'em! They're hangin' back, afraid t' rush an empty house! C'n you beat it? There're eight o' them includin' that over-stuffed Walker and there ain't the guts of a louse among the lot of them. Eight against one, if I was really in the house like they figger I am but none of them've got guts enough to get real close to it for fear that someone who ain't even there'll finally open up on 'em and blast 'em out of their boots!

"They're yellow, every last one of th'm and Walker's yellower'n the rest. G'wan, Boy—get me out of here before I start throwin' lead at them just to watch 'em run!"

- 4 -

ELI BURNS cut across the road that led to town. He had no intention of entering it through its normal channel, the single street, for to do so would be to reveal his presence and thus defeat the purpose of his 'call.'

He circled the town instead; he would approach it from the rear, effecting an entry into *the Westerner's* office through the building's back door or window. In the blue sky he could see a faint glow, the reflection of the town's lights. Now he was abreast of the town though probably a hundred yards away from it. The black's whirlwind pace swept him onward; he finally checked the big horse, slowed him to a trot while he twisted sideways in the saddle and scanned the buildings they had already passed. He hadn't a very definite idea of the location of Horton's place; he tried to re-picture it in his mind but his efforts were not particularly successful. He was pretty certain, however, that it wasn't far from the corner, from the entrance to the town. He decided shortly that they had passed *The Westerner.*

He wheeled the big horse and cantered back. He soon discovered that from the rear the buildings were confusingly alike; the darkness wasn't much help for the night light tended to distort things. To top it all off, there were no distinguishing marks on the buildings to help in identifying them. Burns rode on a bit farther. He suddenly halted the black and dismounted.

"Stay where y'are," he instructed the big horse.

He hitched up his belt and strode briskly away. His long stride brought him within the shadows of the buildings in short order. Fortunately there were no fences to scale, no fences to obscure things. His eyes ranged over the buildings nearest the corner. He looked twice, lingeringly, at one particular building, the fifth from the corner. It seemed to be a bit wider than the others near it—he recalled then that the *Westerner's* plant was a double-windowed affair and he decided that that was probably Horton's place. At first glance it appeared to be totally darkened. That was a discouraging note for if Horton was away it would mean frustration. But his eyes brightened almost immediately—a tiny ray of light sifted through the very bottom of a small window at the rear of the building. Eagerly now he quickened his pace. He bumped into a post and he halted in his tracks. There was a signboard at eye level nailed to the post. He eyed it curiously, interestedly because there was something printed on the board; a single word he soon decided. He twisted it around until what little light there was was focused upon it. *Read*—that was all there was to it.

"Read," he repeated. "Uh-huh—*Read The Westerner* is prob'bly what it was s'pposed t' say. Somebody musta broken off the rest of it. Then this is Horton's place. Reckon that's hittin' it right on the nose the very first time. Luck's still with me, awright."

He made his way to the window and peered in. There was a torn, frayed blind drawn down as far as it would go—it came to within a couple of inches of the sill. He squinted, tried to see inside the place. There were boxes piled against one wall; there was a cot, blanket heaped, against a far wall. He couldn't see very much due to the fact that a huge old desk blocked his view. He noted an opened box standing beside the cot, at the foot of it to be exact, and a lamp that cast off a small, dim, yellowish light stood atop the box.

Eli Burns turned away. There was a door just beyond the window. He glided over to it, tried it, turned the knob slowly, gently; it yielded and opened. In a flash he went over the threshhold and into the room. A ready Colt leaped into his hand. Noiselessly he closed the door behind him. He listened for a moment. Curiously there wasn't a single sound to be heard, not even the heavy, labored breathing of a sleeping man. Could it be that Horton had gone out, that he had lit the lamp and that he had simply forgotten about it?

Then a strange feeling came over him, a feeling that was actually a warning. His fingers tightened around the butt of his gun. Mechanically it came upward, leveled.

Burns' eyes swept over the room, halted on the cot. He moved forward, perhaps a bit hesitantly, perhaps a bit expectantly. He peered out from behind the jutting side of the huge desk. There was someone asleep on the cot, a bulky figure of a man with his face to the wall. Burns came closer and bent over. It was Horton. Burns nodded to himself.

"Horton," he said in a low tone.

There was no response.

"Horton," he said again, a bit impatiently now. He nudged the sleeping man with the muzzle of his gun. "Wake up, man—wake up."

Horton did not stir. Burns holstered his gun, caught Horton's hunched shoulder and pulled him over on his back. His eyes widened. There was a widening stain on Horton's shirtfront—it was blood. In the middle of it all was a knife, buried hilt deep into the pudgy man's heart.

"I'LL BE damned!" Burns whispered. Then the full significance of Horton's untimely and certainly inopportune death became immediately

apparent. "Uh-huh—that's Payfer's doing, all right. He beat me to the punch! He musta figgered I was bound to find out somethin' about this bus'ness and that it'd lead me to Horton. So, to be sure that Horton didn't do any talkin', he knifed 'im! Damn the luck! And after me braggin' that luck was still with me! Next time I do any braggin' about anything I'll make sure that even I can't hear my tongue waggin'!"

He straightened up, turned slowly toward the outer door when he suddenly recalled Willie, the round-faced Chinese. He wondered then where he was. He looked back over his shoulder. There was a closed door beyond. He whirled, strode over to it, listened there for a moment, then he tried the knob. The door opened easily, at once. Burns, standing in the open doorway, heard deep breathing. That was evidently Willie.

Then he sniffed hard. There was a heavy smell about Willie's room, a smell that was immediately recognizable...it was whiskey. He stepped into the darkened room, groped his way forward until his outstretched hands collided with a bedstead. He guided himself around it and finally bent over. The breathing of the sleeping Willie became a snore. He turned and went out, returned presently with Horton's lamp.

The Chinese, fully clad, slippered too, lay face downward across the bed. His left arm hung limply over the side of the bed. Burns bent over him again. Willie's mouth was open. His breath was whiskied, so too were his clothes. Burns came around the bed. There was something on the floor just below the tips of Willie's dangling fingers—it was a bottle, an empty whiskey bottle, and it gleamed brightly in the yellowish lamp light. Burns was motionless for a moment, then he turned on his heel and strode out of the room. He halted briefly beside Horton's cot and returned the lamp to its place atop the upended box. When he straightened up there was a curious expression on his face. He gave Horton a passing glance and went out, closed the door behind him and trudged off.

SOME THIRTY or forty feet away he stopped, wheeled and whipped out a big Colt. It flamed suddenly from his hip with an accompanying roar that broke like a clap of thunder. The window pane fell in with a shattering, explosive crash. Eli Burns looked about him quickly. There was some straggling brush close by and he whirled behind it, dropped down just as a squat figure appeared in the *Westerner's* doorway. It was Willie, silhouetted against the lamp lighted background. Burns grunted.

"That's that," he muttered. "There,s Willie, all right, wide awake and probably scared to death but I'll bet m' shirt he ain't any more drunk'n I am. I think that kinda spoils whatever Payfer mighta had in mind. Now he's gotta go find 'imself somebody else t' pin Horton's killin' on since he can't pin it on Willie."

Willie had emerged now and he was yelling something at the top of his lungs.

"Bet Payfer thought he'd cooked up somethin' that just couldn't miss," Burns mused as he watched. "He figgered he could get rid of Horton without 'anybody ever suspectin' him o' doin' it, then b'cause somebody'd hafta be guilty o' the crime, he fixed things so that Willie would look like the one who'd done the killin.' He slopped whiskey all over 'im, figgerin' that soon's Horton's killin' was discovered somebody'd natur'lly suspect Willie, especially after they got a whiff o' him.

"It'd be cut and dried—everybody'd say that Willie'd gotten likkered up and that he'd killed Norton in a drunken rage. In a few minutes there'd be a hangin' party formed and Willie'd be

swung higher'n a kite. That'd leave Payfer in the clear and nobody'd be any the wiser, We-ll, soon's somebody else comes along I'll fix things so's Willie'll be in the clear, too."

Now several shadowy figures came running up. They gathered around the Chinese, who was still yelling excitedly and pointed at the shattered window and at the back room. More men appeared presently, too. There was loud, excited talk. Burns gun in hand, arose and backed away from the brush.

His big Colt thundered again, suddenly and startlingly, and bullets kicked up the dirt at the surprised men's feet. One or two of them wheeled, jerked out their guns and blazed away, firing at the flashes of the Colt; the others simply bolted away, stumbling and trampling one another, pushing and shoving others out of their way in a frightened, frantic rush to get under cover. There was a pile-up in the open doorway and Burns laughed as he watched the melee. Finally, he holstered his gun, wheeled and darted off.

He felt better now, less bitter over the fact that Payfer had beaten him to Horton; he had evened the score by thwarting Payfer's plot to fasten a crime of his own doing onto an innocent man. That their first encounter hadn't produced more completely gratifying and more conclusive results, we-ll, later on....he frowned and shook his head. He disliked conjecturing.

"But I'd like to be present when them scaredy-cats come rushin' up with the news that Horton's been murdered," he muttered to himself as he raced on. "He'll have to do some tall pretendin', and be as much s'prised and shocked as they are. He'll have to rear up and holler like a good feller and folks'll think he and Horton were the best of friends and that he wouldn't harm a hair of Horton's head."

A bullet whined past him harmlessly, spent itself in aimless, futile flight, but he swerved away mechanically, instinctively.

"Then I'd give a heap to see his face when they tell him that the 'killer' got away and that they were witnesses to his escape," he continued. "Well, if he's half as smart as he tries to make out he oughta be able to figger out that I was the one who gunned up his little plot. But the joke of it is that he'll have to keep his mouth shut. He'll know then that I've found out somethin' and that if I'm pressed, I'll be able to produce what's needed to prove that he wanted Horton killed off."

He was panting now and he broke his stride and slowed down. He whistled and the black's answering whinny came to him through the obscuring darkness. He whistled a second time and he heard the big horse's hoof beats. The black came dashing up to him but Eli Burns side-stepped nimbly, whirled, reached for the saddle-horn, gripped it and swung himself up. The black, with Burns astride him, flashed away.

PAYFER, scowling darkly, was pacing the floor of *Curley's* back room when the door opened and Walker tramped in. Payfer halted abruptly, eyed him questioningly. The red-faced man glanced at him, turned and closed the door behind him, then he swung around, leaned back against the door and shoved his hat back from his eyes. Payfer's frown deepened.

"Well?" he demanded impatiently. "Talk up! How'd you make out?"

Walker shook his head. "We didn't," he replied. "S-ay, what's this I hear 'bout Horton?"

"He's dead," Payfer snapped.

"So I've been told." Walker said calmly. A grin toyed at the corners of his wide mouth. "Funny, ain't it?—but it was only yesterd'y that we were talkin' about how much better off we'd be if somethin' was to happen to Horton an' doggone it, somethin' does!"

There was no comment from the bulky man facing him.

"Now don't get me wrong," the red-faced man added. "Horton didn't mean 'nything to me, b'lieve me. B'sides with him outta th' picture I stand to make a heap more'n I did b'fore so I ain't aimin' to shed 'ny tears over 'im. Now it'll be an even split b'tween you an' me 'stead of the three-way cut we figgered on. But all th' same I'd like to know who killed him."

Payfer continued his silence.

"Doggone it," Walker sputtered. "Can'tcha say 'nything one way or 'nother? Ain'tcha even a mite curious 'bout who it was?"

"No."

Walker shrugged his shoulder. He was silent for a moment, even averted his eyes. Suddenly he straightened up, gave Payfer a sharp look.

"I dunno what's bitin' you," he said, "but whatever it is, don't go takin' it out on me, savvy? Y'know, Payfer—I got 'n idea you know somethin' about Horton's killin'. What's more, I think yuh're holdin' out on me an' I dont like it. Mebbe yuh oughta spill it b'fore I go gettin' ideas. They're li'ble to lead to trouble. Y'know, when I'm sittin' in a game an' I got all my cards on th' table I expect th' other players to have cards where I can see 'em, too. Get it?"

His right hand dropped. It halted just above the butt of his gun. He raised his eyes to meet Payfer's. There was a moment's silence.

"I killed Horton," Payfer said coldly.

Walker's eyebrows arched.

"Oh, yeah? Why?"

"Why?" Payfer echoed. "Because I didn't want him around so's he could spill 'is guts out to Burns, who knows too damned much a'ready 'bout what's been goin' on."

"How d'you know what he knows?"

"How do I....? Walker, you're 'bout as dumb's they come. S'ppose you try listenin' for a change 'stead o' yappin' about somethin' that's over your head—huh?"

"I'm listenin'."

"All right, all right. You went huntin' for Stevens' half o' that damned map but you couldn't find it. Why couldn't you? B'cause Burns beat you to it. He found it. How come he knew about th' map? That's easy—Ginny musta told 'im 'bout it, 'bout that an' everythin' else she knew. Now does that make sense to you?"

Walker rubbed his chin with the back of his big right hand. "Yeah—so far it does."

"Well, that's somethin'. Now stay with me. Burns musta d'cided th' first thing he had to do was get hold o' Horton an' pump 'im for all he knew."

"Uh-huh—an' then?"

"Then?" Payfer repeated. "Hell, I figgered that'd be Burns' move so I beat 'im t' Horton by killin' 'im off. On'y thing that didn't go off 'ccordin' t' plan was that while I'd fixed things so's that damned Willie look like th' killer, Burns musta smelled a rat an' spoiled things by puttin' on 'n act that was so good that nobody even gave Willie a thought. 'Stead, everybody d'cided that somebody they couldn't catch up with, or identify 'count o' th' darkness, done th' killin' an' they were satisfied. Not that it made 'ny difference t' me—long's nobody c'nnected me with th' killin', I was satisfied."

"So that's the story?" Walker mused. "Wait a minute, Payfer, why can't we spread word aroun' that that was Burns they saw hightailin' it away fr'm Horton's place—huh? That'd be a damned good way o' gettin' rid o' him, wouldn't it?"

"Nope," Payfer said with finality. "It wouldn't do. We couldn't figger out a reason f'r Burns wantin' t' kill Horton off. They didn't know each other fr'm a hole in th' ground an' strangers don't go killin' one 'nother f'r no good reason."

"Yeah," Walker admitted. "I s'p pose that's right. Then what c'n we do? I'd hate like hell t' lose out on that mine."

Payfer laughed softly.

We ain't gonna lose out on anythin'," he said determinedly. "We're gonna get that other half o' th' map —d'pend on it."

"How we gonna get it?"

"I think Mister Burns will be on'y too glad t' hand it over when th' time comes."

The red-faced man shook his head.

"Yuh're 'way ahead o' me now. S'ppose yuh circle back an' pick me up again so's we c'n start even?"

"Awright. I aim t' trade with Burns, even up—Ginny Stevens f'r th' other half o' th' map."

Walker's eyes widened.

"Yeah? But don't we hafta get hold o' her first? How d'we go about that?"

Payfer laughed again. "We're gonna kidnap her—that's how."

"Kidnap her?" Walker echoed. A frown spread over his face. "Ain't that stickin' our necks out kinda far?"

PAYFER'S face grew hard and grim. "When you're playin' f'r high stakes, Mister, an' you're playin' t' win," he said coldly, "you gotta keep chippin' or quit. S-o, if you'd rather step out now, it'll be awright with me. I c'n allus find somebody who's willin' t' take a chance f'r somethin' worthwhile, y'know."

"Who said I wasn't willin'?" Walker demanded belligerently.

Payfer laughed lightly. "Nobody," he answered and laughed again.

"All right, then," Walker said loudly. He hitched up his belt. "C'mon, gimme th' dope. I'm ready. I'll show yuh I ain't scared. Just you tell me what t' do—an I'll do it, understan'?"

" 'Course. When you were at th' Stevens' place there wasn't any sign o' Ginny aroun', was there?"

"Nope," Walker said definitely. "There wasn't 'ny sign o' anybody."

"Uh-huh, that's th' way I figgered it'd be," Payfer said. "Burns prob'bly told 'er t' stay th' hell away fr'm there, leastways f'r th' time bein' anyway."

"S'ppose she's hightailed it away fr'm these parts?"

"Hightailed it, hell!" Payfer retorted. "Somebody told me she an' th' Carter girl've allus been kinda chummy, so...."

"Then th' chances are I'll find 'er at the Carter place," Walker said quickly, interrupting.

Payfer grinned. "Right."

Walker grinned back at him. He felt better—he felt that he had vindicated himself by beating Payfer to the actual voicing of the thought.

"Y'see—I ain't as dumb's yuh think I am," he said. I allus start slow but I pick up ground's I go along and at th' finish I'm allus right up there with th' others!"

-5-

THE BLACK came out of the waning darkness, bent over Eli Burns and whinnied softly. There was no response. The big horse came a bit closer, nudged him and Burns grunted, half in acknowledgment, half in protest at being disturbed. The black nudged him a second time and Burns rolled over and suddenly sat up. He looked about him quickly, then up at the black. The big horse whinnied again.

He had heard something in the immediate distance; he listened intently and heard it again, the recognizable but grass muffled gallop of a horse. He was motionless for another moment, head bent listening; when the echoing

clatter faded away he relaxed, however the frown on his face indicated that he was wondering who the horseman was, wondering too where he was going. One didn't go galloping about at such an hour unless....a yawn overtook him and he stretched himself.

He yawned again, rubbed his heavy-lidded eyes and looked skyward. There was a faint glow of light on the horizon. Its reflection in the drab and almost colorless sky deepened. In another hour it would be day.

He kicked off the blanket and climbed to his feet. He was stiff and cramped. He pulled the brim of his hat a bit farther down over his eyes, hitched up his belt and plodded off. He halted abruptly, grimaced and rubbed his right leg, tenderly at first, then vigorously; after a minute when the blood began to circulate through it again, he went on. He had camped on a summit that overlooked the Carter place—now he came to the very edge and looked down. He noticed—casually then because it wasn't especially important at the moment—that the light had brightened.

There was the ranchhouse, heavy-framed, solid and sturdy—the low, long, sprawling structure opposite it was the bunkhouse. A hulking barn towered massively skyward from a point behind the bunkhouse while some fifty feet beyond the bunkhouse was a spacious corral, empty, of activity abot the place; begrudgingly Burns admitted that it was still pretty early, in the same breath that he was a bit envious of folks who were still comfortably abed.

His envy vanished when he suddenly realized that he was hungry. He hadn't had much for supper the previous night, nothing but a few strips of bacon and a cup of coffee. For a brief moment he considered tramping back and fixing himself something to eat but he soon discarded the idea. He wasn't particularly hungry, he decided; actually he was hungry for something other than bacon and coffee. He wondered if the Carter hands 'went' for hot cakes—ah, that was it, a heaping, steaming plate full!

HE TURNED on his heel. The black was much easier to please. He was busily munching grass when Burns came striding back. He looked up—when he saw Burns pick up his heavy saddle he came forward. He was patiently motionless while the saddle was swung onto his broad back, the cinches drawn tight and the bit shoved into his mouth. He turned his head and watched Burns strap on the blanket roll.

Burns reached for the bridle, suddenly remembered that he hadn't put away the coffee pot he'd used late the previous night. He'd been too tired to bother with it then. He turned and went back for it; he found it where he had left it, atop a flat, fire-scorched rock, caught it up, emptied its contents into the grass and stowed it away inside an already crowded and bulky saddlebag. He swung himself up into the saddle and rode slowly away, down a trail that wound through trees and brush. Presently they emerged into the open again and onto level ground. The black cantered away briskly.

Burns jerked him to an abrupt stop when a piece of checkered cloth fluttered by. He twisted around and watched it level off and drop earthward gently a dozen feet beyond... a sudden gust of wind caught it up and spun it away, then just as suddenly vanished into nothingness and dropped it limply among some brush. Burns frowned...there was a strange ringing in his ears, the echo

of the galloping horse's hoofs he had heard earlier. Was there some connection between the horse and that strip of cloth? He wheeled the black and loped away.

His eyes ranged over the grassy fields. hHe spied another piece of colored cloth, swerved the black and sent him racing toward it. He pulled up, leaned down out of the saddle and scooped it up. It was a piece of gingham, similar to color and everything else to the first piece he had spotted. He shoved it into his pocket and went on again. Breakfast, even his longing for hot cakes, was forgotten.

A hundred feet away he found a third piece of gingham, found still another, smaller than the first piece, that, impaled upon the needle-tipped briar of some tall brush. There was still another piece a couple of hundred feet distant, another and still another, smaler than the first piece, spaced apart as though someone had dropped them there purposely. The frown on Eli Burns' face deepened. He spurred the black and the big horse bounded away. Now the strips appeared less frequently...that they appeared at all significant to Burns and he followed along. He looked up now and noted with surprise that Hawk Pass lay dead ahead of him, probably a mile or so away.

But now he spied a piece of gingham on the trail that led away from the Pass and he swung away, too. The trail dipped downward presently. He followed it doggedly, alertly, on and on for probably a mile...when he looked up again the Pass was behind him and its walls were towering skyward even higher than before. There was a thick brush ahead, trees and boulders, too.

He guided the black away from a stretch of shale, choosing instead the grass beyond it in order to muffle his horse's hoofbeats. Then a rifle cracked ominously and a bullet screamed past his head. He threw himself forward against the black's neck, drove his spurs into the animal's flanks and thundered away, only to pull up sharply some fifty feet beyond. In a flash he was out of the saddle, gun in hand.

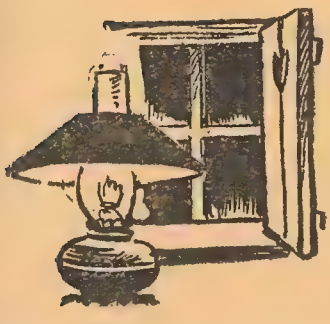
"Go on!" he snapped to the black and the big horse loped off.

BURNS WENT forward now, threading his way through brush that tore at his clothes and at his left arm protecting his face. He was going uphill again, he noticed presently; stopped abruptly when he saw broken, trampled bits of brush strewn over the ground directly ahead of him. It was the mark of a horse, and there was confirmation of it close at hand, too.

There was a small, grassless patch of ground just beyond...the print of a horse's hoof was clearly outlined on the dirt surface. He noted, too, that the hoof print was a fresh one, evidence that the horse had passed through there but recently. He tightened his grip on his gun butt. He turned quickly when he heard a sudden clatter of hoofs somewhere behind him. Through the brush he caught a fleeting glimpse of a horse as it flashed past at a full gallop. There was no mistaking that horse...it was the black!

A rifle cracked and Burns whirled around again, just in time, too, to spot a tiny wisp of white smoke curl upward from a point behind a clump of brush not more than a dozen feet away. The black came thundering back and again he drew the fire of the hidden rifleman, but this time the alert Burns, waiting for such an opportunity when his unseen opponent was preoccupied, went plunging ahead through the brush.

He burst out, found himself in a tiny clearing, stumbled awkwardly off-balance over a blanketed heap. He jerked himself away from it to avoid tripping over it and stared at it wide-eyed when it threshed about and actually pulled away from him. A rifle



flamed with a thunderous, close-up roar and he replied to it mechanically. Blue smoke swirled around him.

The shadow of a burly man fell across the intervening space; presently there was a heavy, stumbling step and a man, his left arm thrown up over his bloodied head and face, staggered out of the brush. He swayed and his left arm came down. It was Walker. There was no sign of his rifle. His legs buckled beneath him, but only for a moment...he straightened up with an effort, braced himself on wide-spread legs, raised his head. Blood spouted from an ugly wound in the side of his head, ran down his face. He stared hard at the black-clad man who stood just beyond him, watching him, motionless but alert. He blinked, then his right hand groped awkwardly toward the holster that swung below his hip.

"Don't touch it," Eli Burns said sharply.

Walker's hand had reached the butt of his gun. He jerked his arm upward, fired from the hip. The Colt boomed overpoweringly in reply. Walker grunted, dropped his gun; he swayed again and his eyes closed. He pitched forward on his face. He moved once, a nervous twitching that ran through his big body and right leg, but it was only a momentary shudder, then he lay still. Burn's strode up to him, kicked the fallen man's gun into the brush, bent over him, turned him over on his broad back. One look was sufficient...Walker was dead.

Burns holstered his gun. He trudged off, retraced his steps to the blanketed heap, eyed it curiously for a moment, circled it, then suddenly snatched the blanket away. He stared at what he saw there with widening eyes...it was the bound and gagged body of a girl. Her hair had tumbled down over her face, but there was something about her that he recognized at once. It was Ginny Stevens. She moved, threw her head back. Her eyes opened, ranged over him, upward from his boot tops to the brace of heavy guns that hung low against his lean, muscular thighs, then upward to his face. A great, muffled sob shook her, broke from her.

"Burns!"

He dropped to one knee beside her. Her eyes closed again. She seemed to crumble...she sagged and toppled sideways and fell into his arms.

There was a curious movement in the brush beyond, a heavy-bodied stirring and threshing about...a horse poked his head out, eyed Burns and whinnied. He pushed his way out of the brush, plodded up to Burns and sniffed, and whinnied shrilly. He nudged Walker, nudged him a second time, eagerly, but there was no response.

THE STREET was hushed and deserted. A hatless man suddenly emerged from an alley-way just beyond *Curley's;* he straightened up jerkily, hitched up his pants, trudged heavily and rather awkwardly across the rutted street to the Hawk Hotel and tried the door. It was locked and he hammered on it with his fist; when no one appeared in answer to his summons, he yelled something in a loud, liquor-thickened voice, turned away and finally trudged off. He staggered once or twice, came dangerously close to the curb...he straightened up and jerked himself away, and managed to save himself from tumbling into the gutter.

He tried a dozen doors along the street but with no apparent success. Finally, he halted and managed to turn himself around...it was a curious

swinging around in which his legs became tangled up and he nearly fell down...retraced his steps to the Hotel and tried the door again.

He shook his head; muttered something to himself and went on, crossed the street again and headed for the alleyway from which he had come; he reconsidered and turned into the doorway of a vacant store. Carefully he lowered himself to the ground. He stretched himself out, pillowed his head in the hollow of his arm, sighed and went to sleep.

Now there was a clatter of hoofs at the head of the street...a horse suddenly appeared there. He halted for a moment and shook himself vigorously, but the heavy body that was lashed across his back refused to become dislodged. He snorted loudly and pawed the ground, finally went on, twisting and prancing in a never-ending effort to rid himself of his burden. He jogged down the street.

As he came abreast of *Curley's* the door opened and a tall man peered out. It was Payfer. The horse halted, turned toward him and whinnied. Payfer stared hard at the body that hung head downward across the animal's back.

Quickly he strode across the narrow sidewalk to the curb. His eyes widened incredulously, unbelieving. His face whitened...he backed away hastily, turned suddenly on his heel and plunged toward the open door.

"Payfer!" he heard a voice call.

He froze in his tracks. His right arm doubled up against his chest. His fingers opened gently, flexed themselves and crept upward and into his coat. For a brief moment he was motionless, then he jerked his hand out, whirled and fired. A Colt thundered...the roar of gunfire echoed down the street. Gunsmoke curled upward, climbed lazily in the air.

There was a momentary lull...The silence that usually follows a sudden outburst. Windows in the Hawk Hotel were thrown open and startled, sleepy-eyed men poked their heads out. The drunken man in the doorway of the vacant store raised his head.

"Quiet!" he yelled, and sank down again.

Payfer was rigidly erect. There was a blue, blunt-nosed gun clutched tightly in his right hand. Flame flashed from it again...the Colt boomed promptly in reply, then it added an additional shot. Payfer sagged and dropped his gun. It fell at his feet. He forced himself up again, spread his legs a bit, braced himself and bent down slowly. He managed, with an effort, to pick up his gun. When he straightened up again he grimaced. He pressed his lips together, steadied himself, and leveled his gun when the Colt thundered a mighty, concluding note. A shudder ran through Payfer. His arm came down...his fingers opened and the gun slid harmlessly to the ground.

He staggered helplessly across the sidewalk to the curb, sagged and fell against the horse and its lashed-on burden. He went down to his knees. His arms came up, groped for something...his fingers tightened around the rope which bound Walker to the horse. For a moment Payfer clung there; he tried to pull himself up. His arms fell away. He tottered and fell sideways into the gutter, landed on his shoulder and rolled over on his face.

Burns, gun in hand, came out of the doorway of the *Westerner*. Behind him, just inside the door, was Willie, his eyes popping. Burns holstered his gun and strode briskly across the street. He bent over Payfer, turned him over on his back, unbuttoned the man's coat and plunged his hand into his pocket. He fumbled there for a moment, finally drew out some papers; he thumbed through them until he came to a folded sheet of paper with a torn, ragged edge. He flipped it open, glanced at it and nodded to himself, shoved the paper into his shirt pocket. He returned the other papers to

Payfer's coat pocket and straightened up.

He whistled shrilly. There was an immediate answer...the black suddenly appeared at the head of the street. Burns whistled again. The black bounded away. He came flashing down the street and slid to a halt in front of *Curley's*. Burns stepped forward, reached for the reins, climbed up into the saddle. He wheeled the black, spurred him and rode swiftly out of town.

ELI BURNS and a lean, blond, youthful man sat atop the bars of the Carter corral. Their horses ...the black and the other man's sorrel...were tethered together a dozen feet away. A silver star that bore the word *Ranger* on its polished surface gleamed brightly on the stranger's shirt front.

"Good thing you sent word to me when you did, eh," he said. "I was headin' up-country so soon's I heard you wanted me I came over this way instead. But now that I've had a chance to look this place over...heck, this'd be a heap better spot for another Ranger headquarters then from any other place. I oughta get an answer from the Chief inside of a couple o' days an' everything'll be set."

Burns nodded.

"But there ain't anythin' I can do to talk yuh outta leavin', eh?" his companion went on. "Heck, Burns... what d'yuh want to go to Colorado for, anyway, huh? What's Colorado got that we ain't got?"

Burns grinned at him. "Doggone you, Smith Jenkins...ain't you ever gonna quit askin' me that?"

"Nope," Jenkins answered calmly. "Ain't been able to get an answer outta yuh yet that satisfies me so I'll just keep askin' till I do. Ain't you ever gonna settle down somewheres?"

"Sure...some day."

"Wish that day was today. Y'know, Eli...we could do big things t'gether. We've allus worked well t'gether... you know that well's I do...an' now with this part o' th' country openin' up so wide, heck, we'd be big men 'round here. What d'yuh say, Eli... lemme send word to th' Chief to get yuh a reg'lar Ranger appointment... huh?"

Burns shook his head.

"Don't know of anybody I'd sooner tie up with than you, Smith, but it's no go.

"You'll take care of things for Ginny Stevens, won't you, Smith?"

"'Course. I'll see to it that her claim's registered, and the fella that tries to jump it had better make his arrangements with the undertaker ahead o' time. But nobody'll bother her again. Fellas like Payfer don't like to tangle with th' Rangers... we're bad medicine for them. Eli ... how'n hell d'you allus manage to run into pretty girls a-needin' help? Doggone it...I never have any luck like that. What's th' secret o' yore success. huh?"

"O-h, I s'ppose it's just that they seem to know when I'm due to show up an' they just wait 'longside the trail 'till I do. Fact that it nearly allus happens to be a pretty girl....reckon it's natural. I'm a heap handsomer'n you are."

THE RANGER scoffed openly. "The hell yuh are! You can smell trouble an' a girl a mile off. That proves you got a heap bigger nose'n I have. Mine's kinda cute...don'tcha think so? Awright then...that makes me out prettier'n you are."

"You're jealous of me, that's all." Jenkins grinned boyishly.

"S'ppose so, Eli. Look...there's Ginny an' the Carter girl now. See 'em? They just came outta th' house for a little sunnin'. S-ay, that Carter girl ain't hard on th' eyes, neither... know that? Doggone it...I think I'm gonna like this new assignment."

Burns laughed.

"Then it's safe for me to go. Mebbe the girls'll keep you so danged busy b'tween 'em you won't have time to think of me an' Colorado. Better be careful you don't fall in the Grand Canyon."

He slid to the ground, hitched up his gunbelt. The Ranger climbed down, too. He followed at Burns' heels, held the bridle while Burns climbed astride the black. Burns settled himself in the saddle.

"So long, Smith," he said and leaned forward, his hand extended. "Don't get into trouble while I'm away."

The Ranger grinned up at him and shook his head. He released Burns' hand and stepped back. Burns wheeled the black and cantered away. As he came abreast of the house the girls on the porch looked up quickly, waved to him. He acknowledged it gravely.

Minutes later the long-striding black reached the open road. Burns halted him there. He stood up in his stirrups and waved his hat. Jenkins had sauntered over to the house...he joined the girls on the porch. As they watched, horse and rider rode swiftly away.

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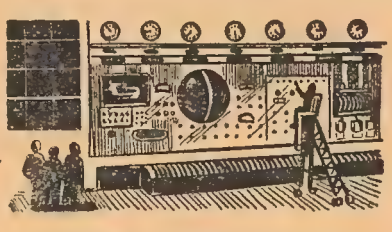

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A Judge Steele Story

THE MORTAL BLOW

by LON WILLIAMS

The whole question was, could a man be charged with murdering another man who was but moments away from death? And consarn it, if he couldn't, then as mean a scoundrel as Judge Steele had ever glared at in his court room would walk out free!

JUDGE WARDLOW STEELE settled into his judicial chair, resolved that for once he would control his temper and conduct his court with dignity. Accordingly, he nodded genially to his right. "Call court, Sheriff."

Big, rawboned Jerd Buckalew glanced up, startled at his strange note of gentleness in Flat Creek's remorseless judge. After a confused moment he tapped gently with his forty-five. "This court is now in session. Let there be no disturbance, please."

Steele nodded again. "Call fust case, Mr. Skiffington."

Clerk James Skiffington rose, tall, thin, gloomy, and adjusted his spectacles like a person about to read Scripture. "People *versus* Park Malone, alias Spit Malone. Charges, first-degree murder."

Steele glanced down at Flat Creek's latest transgressor, a swarthy, sharp-faced character with thick black hair and gander-blue eyes. Words of scorn and denunciation surged to Steele's brain, but dignity and judical temperament prevailed. "Have you a lawyer?" he asked politely.

A stout, round-faced gentleman with thin hair and a short mustache rose with inflated chest. "I am his lawyer, suh. Lexicon Hutto."

Hutto's presence Steele regarded with favor, as he so regarded any weak defender. Yet he yielded to curiosity. "I trust your associate, French Demeree, has come to no bad luck?"

Hutto bowed slightly. "Mr. Demeree is presently indisposed with lagrippe, your honor."

Steele wanted to say he hoped that

Demeree's indisposition would prove to be permanent. Instead he responded, "I hope it's not serious, Mr. Hutto." He turned left. "Mr. Claybrook, I believe."

A stocky redhead with excellent face and high-minded demeanor arose courteously. "Yes, your honor. Prosecuting attorney."

A quick, unintended glance warned Steele that spectators were mentally confused, puzzled, disturbed. Some were whispering noisily. Those inclined to hostility were smirking and winking at one another. Steele forgot his high resolve; his anger rose. Before he realized his error, he stormed at Sheriff Buckalew, "Bucky, what in tarnation are you doing hyar? You're supposed to keep order in this court room."

Buckalew sprang up. "You people heard me say this court's in session. If it takes a cracked head to prove it, that's what you'll get."

"Consarned barbarians!" Steele growled, as deathly quiet settled. He glanced down at defendant Malone, his judicial composure gone. "All right, you murdering ape, what's your plea?"

Hutto got up. "His plea is not guilty, suh."

"Not guilty, eh? By thunder, if you ask me, he looks as guilty as a snake that's swallowed a nest of gophers. Pannel a jury, Bucky."

While jurors were being empaneled and witnesses called and sworn, he stewed inwardly. Any time he tried to act civilized, he got a jolt. Well, beconsarned; if being a judge required savagery, a savage he'd be—and any varmit who committed murder would end up with a stretched neck, like he ought to.

"Claybrook, call your witness."

CLAYBROOK nodded to a deputy. "Call Wilt Urick."

Urick was brought in and seated. He was about thirty, just under six feet, bony, his rough face expressionless. "Your name?" asked Claybrook.

"Wilt Urick."

"Sometimes called Mildew Urick?"

"Sometimes."

"Did you know defendant Park Malone before you came to Flat Creek?"

"Object, suh," shouted Hutto, rising. "What acquaintance he may have had with defendant is irrelevant. It is fundamental that a defendant's past history may not be dragged into evidence, be it good or bad."

Steele's temper had swung from equanimity to unchained fury. "See hyar, Hutto, we're trying this baboon for murder. If his past will help hang him, then it's relevant, by thunder. You go easy on your objecting."

Claybrook interposed magnanimously, "Mr. Hutto is correct, your honor."

"No he ain't, Claybrook; you stick to your guns."

Claybrook lifted his pink eyebrows. "Yes, your honor." He glared at his witness. "Mr. Urick, did you come up from St. Joseph, Missouri, with Jeff Mudlin's wagon train?"

"Object," shouted Hutto. "That's a leading question. Mr. Claybrook knows he is not permitted to ask leading questions."

"I shall restate it," Claybrook said hastily. "Mr. Urick, are you acquainted with defendant Malone?"

"Yes."

"Where or when did you first know him?"

Urick settled back for a quiet, long talk. "Well, sir, I got acquainted with Spit Malone while we was in wagon camp in St. Jo. He was one of these fellers—"

"Object!" shouted Hutto. "He was not asked to describe defendant; he should not be permitted to do so anyhow."

Claybrook cut in ahead of Steele's impending outburst. "Mr. Urick, you will please just answer my questions. If I want elaboration, I shall call for

it." He hurried ahead. "Now, Mr. Urick, did you also know a man named Jethro Fogg?"

"You mean him that was murdered?"

Hutto rose indignantly. "Your honnor, suh, defendant objects to any reference to murder. It is Mr. Claybrook's obligation to prove whether or not there *was* a murder. This witness may state facts; he may not state conclusions, expressly or impliedly."

"I refer to him who was recently killed in Flat Creek," said Claybrook, "namely, Jethro Fogg."

"Sure," said Urick. "I knowed Ro Fogg."

"Were Fogg and defendant acquainted with each other?"

"Were they? Humph! That's putting it mildly. They—"

"Object!" Hutto shouted and got up angrily. "This witness is not answering questions; he is volunteering information."

"Mr. Hutto is right," said Claybrook.

"No he ain't right," declared Steele. "But even if he is, you don't have to admit it."

"If I may say so, suh," intervened Hutto, "Mr. Claybrook is to be commended for his sense of honor and rectitude. Such is a part of orderly justice, as well as professional ethics."

"Hutto, set down."

Hutto glanced at a group of scowling deputies and eased down.

Steele gave Claybrook a lashing glance. "Get some testimony out of this witness."

CLAYBROOK'S face tightened. He glowered at Urick. "Were Ro Fogg and defendant Malone acquainted with each other?"

"Yes, sir," replied Urick, a little scared.

"Did they have any difficulties?"

Hutto started to get up, but decided against it.

"They had difficulties," said Urick.

"What about?"

"About a woman."

"What woman?"

"She called herself Philippa Elderson. She was a widow, and a right lively one, too. It was said around that she'd run off from a husband in Western Kentucky and joined up with Cooley Elderson, a gambler. In St. Joseph—"

Claybrook stopped him. "Mr. Urick, I'm sure these enchanting details would be highly entertaining in gossip circles, but in this court room—"

Steele was disgusted with Claybrook. "Hold on thar, Wade; those enchanting details would be right entertaining hyar, too. I suggest you set down and rest a while."

Claybrook flushed with resentment. "If your honor please, I'm prosecuting attorney in this court. I expect to exercise my prerogative—"

"Claybrook, your prerogative right now is to set down." Steele jerked his head at Sheriff Buckalew. "Bucky, thar's no privileged characters around hyar. When I tell a man to set down, I don't like to tell him twice."

Claybrook eased down.

Steele looked at Wilt Urick. "Mildew, give out with them enchanting details."

Urick twisted round toward Steele. "That's where their trouble started, Judge; it was over this woman. Cooley Elderson got outdrawed by a gunslick in a crooked poker game in St. Joseph. After he was buried, this woman—his so-called widow—put on her brightest clothes and started making eyes at men. There was a hundred of us wagons, including Malone and Ro Fogg. Malone and Ro got into a fuss over Philippa Elderson, and Ro give Malone as bad a whupping as I ever saw a man take. No sooner was it over than Philippa ran off with Thad Cedrick, who was also one of our wagons. After that, there was a three-way sort of hatred. Malone's

worst feeling, however, was toward Ro Fogg.

"Every time we camped, Malone would come round from fire to fire. He'd stand and spit and talk about Fogg. 'I'll see him dead, mind you,' he'd say. 'Remember what I tell you; I'll see him dead.' He'd always have his knife out. He'd whittle, then he'd spit. "Ro Fogg has laid his hands on one man too many," he'd say. Then he'd spit and whittle some more. It was like that on up to Flat Creek. Of course, when we reached here, I went about my own business and heard no more about it until I heard Jethro Fogg was dead."

"Back to your witness room," Steele nodded, and Urick went out.

"Now, suh," said Hutto, getting up in righteous protest, "defendant must object to all of this testimony. There is but one issue in this case, and that is weather or not defendant Malone murdered Jethro Fogg. All of this talk about romance and fighting has no relevancy to that issue; therefore it should not be considered by our jury. In fact, it is my position that its admission is ground for declaring mistrial."

Claybrook had eased up. "I agree with Mr. Hutto. Even though defendant may be guilty, he is entitled to a fair trial in strict accord with rules of evidence. Because a man whittles and spits is no reason for regarding him as a murderer, or as an intended murderer. In fairness to this defendant, I move—"

"Claybrook, call your next witness. If it warn't for consarned lawyers, we might get somewhars."

Claybrook sulked for a while then nodded at a deputy. "Call Percival Tell."

TELL WAS a middle-aged, but much-shriveled character with thick, well-groomed hair and an extraordinarily expressive face. He took his seat, looked pleasant, then sad, then stupid. "Your name?" asked Claybrook.

Tell gave Claybrook a pitying smile. "My full name, sir?"

Claybrook replied curtly, "What is your name?"

"My full name is Percival Harrington Weatherly Settlemire Tell."

"Sometimes called Do Tell?" Claybrook asked spitefully.

Tell replied with an idiotic smile, "Sometimes."

"What is your profession?"

"My profession is varied and various," Tell replied. "Back East I was an entertainer, dealing principally in impersonations. I also do auctioneering, and occasionally I deal in fine horses."

"How did you come to Flat Creek?"

"I came with Capt. Jeff Mudlin's wagon train from St. Joseph, Missouri."

Claybrook glanced bitterly at Judge Steele, then at his witness. "Mr. Tell, you are aware that one Park, alias Spit Malone is being tried on a charge of having murdered Jethro Fogg. On that long journey from St. Joseph to Flat Creek, you no doubt learned something concerning relations between Malone, Fogg and others directly or remotely connected with events which led to Fogg's death." Claybrook again glanced at Steele, spite in his face. "Now, sir," he said to Tell, "please relate what you learned about Malone, Fogg, and others, as well as said events."

"Now, suh," objected Hutto, "this witness is not a lawyer and of course has no sense of distinction between what is relevant and what is irrelevant. If Mr. Claybrook refuses to question him, I should have that privilege by way of cross-examination, or there should be no examination at all."

Claybrook remained silent.

Steele glanced at Tell. "Get on with your story."

Tell leaned forward slightly and gestured with his right hand, then with

his left, as if striking with a whip.

"Why do you do that?" demanded Claybrook.

"That's to illustrate how Malone talked," replied Tell. "First, he would spit to his right, then he'd spit left. *Pft! Pft!*"

"Go ahead."

"It took us seven weeks to come up from St. Jo, making twenty miles a day, not counting time out for three Indian fights. Estimating Malone's spits as eight per minute during every waking hour, I figured that between St. Jo and Flat Creek he spit over two hundred thousand times."

"Object!" snapped Hutto. "This trial is becoming ridiculous."

"I object, too," said Claybrook. "This witness is creating a thing of mockery of what should be a serious and solemn proceeding."

"Go ahead, Tell," growled Steele.

"My point was this," said Tell, with a devoutly honest expression. "Between each spit, Malone had something derogatory to say concerning Jethro Fogg. He exhausted his own vocabulary, as well as that of any other man who had appropriate words to loan. One evening, according to Malone, Fogg was a worm. Not any particular worm, but all worms, from maggots to screw-worms. Next evening Fogg was a frog. At another time he was a wart. He was a wart on a pig's nose. He was a wart on various parts of a mule. He was a wart on just about every kind of creature on earth."

"Enough of that," snapped Steele. "What did he have to do with this killing?"

"THAT WAS part of it, Judge," said Tell, "but not all. In Flat Creek he kept it up, with additions of what Thad Cedrick was saying about Jethro Fogg, and what Jethro Fogg was saying about Thad Cedrick. Malone trotted back and forth between them, telling Cedrick what Fogg had said about him, and Fogg what Cedrick had said."

"How does this witness know all that?" demanded Hutto. "He's worse than an old gossip. Defendant objects."

"I saw and heard it," retorted Tell. "If you want particulars, I can give them."

"Let's have particulars," said Hutto.

"All right, you asked for 'em." Tell gestured with his right hand, then with his left, as if wielding a whip in each. "On Friday I was on Pflueger's store porch with some other men, including Cedrick, when Malone comes rushing up.

"Careful, Cedrick," he said, and spit. "Ro Fogg's making his threats. Said if you ever cross his path, you wouldn't live to do it again. He says you think you've got you a woman, but he says you're wrong. He says it's a woman that's got you."

"Cedrick says, 'You tell Ro Fogg to keep his big mouth shut, or I'll shut it for him.' Right away Malone took off to find Fogg."

"Your honor," said Claybrook, "I'd like to question this witness."

"This witness is doing fine, Wade," Steele replied. "Just hold your horses." He nodded to Tell. "Proceed."

"Well, sir, I was at Amory's livery barn that same day, when Ro Fogg dropped by. He's no more'n said howdy when Malone comes at a run.

" 'Well, Fogg,' says Malone, 'I guess your time's about up. Not that I care, understand. But Thad Cedrick says you've got a mouth that ought to be kept shut. He says you're a liar, and nobody ever believed a word you ever said.' "

"And Fogg says, 'Look here, Malone, are you trying to stir up trouble between me and Cedrick?'

"Then Malone says, 'Nothing would suit me better than seeing you up to your neck in trouble, but it's your own trouble you've stirred up. Cedrick's going to kill you.'

"And Fogg says, 'Since you like to carry tales, suppose you carry this one. You tell Cedrick I've got no hard feelings against him, and if he thinks otherwise, it's because of some lie a filthy tale-bearer named Spit Malone has been telling him.'

"Malone says, 'I sure won't tell him that. Besides, I won't tell you anything else. If Cedrick shoots you on sight, that'll be fine with me. You can't say I didn't warn you, though.' With that he heads out to look for Cedrick."

"Suh, how do you know he headed out to look for Cedrick?" demanded Hutto.

"He said so," Tell made his face flabby and drew his mouth corners down. "This is how Malone fixed his face when he looked back for a last word. He spit and said, 'I'll tell Cedrick you're afraid of him. *Pft!* That's what it amounts to. *Pft!* A lot of men in this town are saying so. They're saying Cedrick took your woman away from you and you're afraid to do anything about it. *Pft!*' That made Fogg red-hot, but before he could do anything about it, Malone spit again and lit out."

Claybrook got up. "While you're giving particulars, what did you observe about Malone last Wednesday morning?"

"Before I come to that," said Tell, "there's something else—"

"You heard my question," Claybrook reminded him.

"Your question I heard," said Tell, "and your question I shall answer. When Malone left Amory's livery barn, he started looking. I, also, started looking for Cedrick, intending to warn him against Malone's tale-bearing. But Malone found him before I did and when I came in sight of them, it was going like this."

TELL TOSSED his right hand, then his left, as if cracking small whips. "I got there in time to hear Malone say, 'I told Fogg you was twice as good a man as he is, take it fists, knives or guns. *Pft!*'

"And Fogg said, 'You tell Cedrick I'm looking for him, and I'm coming for a showdown. You can also tell Cedrick what kind of tale's going round about him, that he murdered his wife back in Missouri.' "

" 'I told Fogg that was killing talk, and he'd better stay out of your path, or you'll kill him certain.' Cedrick closes his fist as if about to hit Malone, but changes his mind and walks off in a hurry."

Claybrook met Tell's glance with a sneer. "You were asked about last Wednesday morning."

"Sure," responded Tell. "That was when it happened. I was down by Cooksy Blair's saloon where men were to be hired for work on a stamp mill on Upper Aspen Fork. Ro Fogg was there, too, waiting to be hired. Pflueger's store was some distance off, but not so far but what Malone could be seen giving it that." He flipped with his right hand, then with his left. "After Malone had talked a while, and spit several times, men at Pflueger's disappeared inside. Malone's next stop was in front of Snip-snip Oliver's barber shop, where he spit some more."

Hutto got up. "Your honor, suh, this has gone far enough. What commenced sublime has emerged ridiculous. In my opinion, Do Tell is a worse gossip than he's trying to make defendant out to be. If justice cannot find her way with more dignity than this—"

"Set down, Hutto," growled Steele. "Even a gossip can sometimes relate true facts. Go ahead, Tell."

"Well, Judge, when Malone comes rushing into our crowd, we gather what he's been talking to others about. Malone spits and says, "Men, there's gonna be a killing. *Pft!* Better get inside, there's gonna be a killing." Somebody asks who is going to kill whom. 'It's Cedrick,' says Malone. 'He's on his way to kill Jethro Fogg. He's liqoured up and glaring through his

eyebrows. *Pft!* I try to talk him out of it. *Pft!* I tell him Fogg will be too fast for him. *Pft!* But he won't listen.

"Some men try to talk Fogg into leaving, but Fogg only goes inside long enough to get a drink at Cooksy's bar. When he comes out, he's got a determined look in his eye. A killing has no appeal to me, so I leave. But I am hardly gone before I hear two shots. I turn back, of course, and when I finally shove my way up to where I can see, there they lay, Cedrick and Fogg, both dead."

Steele scowled at Hutto. "Professor, want to cross-examine?"

Hutto got up pompously. "Your honor, suh, this gossipy witness has made defendant's conduct look reprehensible enough, but even if it were true, which I seriously doubt, it does not make out murder. So far as my knowledge goes—and it goes pretty far, suh—tale-bearing is not murder."

"Is that all you've got to say?"

"It is, suh."

"Next witness, Claybrook."

Claybrook had assumed a determined look, which Steele regarded with approval. "Call Green Weed," said Wade.

Weed was a chunky man with a nasal drip. He sniffed and drew a sleeve across his nose. His eyes watered, too.

"Your name?" asked Claybrook.

"Weed's my name," he replied in a wheezy voice.

"Is there something wrong with you?" asked Claybrook.

"Nothing but the dag-gone sniffles," Weed replied.

"Did you see Thad Cedrick and Jethro Fogg shoot each other?"

"I did."

"Describe that shooting."

"All right," sniffed Weed. "Fogg had just come out of Cooksy Blair's saloon and was standing off there by hisself." *Sniff!* "Suddenly Thad Cedrick appeared a few steps away. It looked like Thad was surprised. He'd come round a corner, and there was Jethro Fogg, staring right at him. Both stared hard, neither one seeming to want to go for his gun" *Sniff!* "Cedrick started to say something, but that little bit of motion it took to speak set Jethro off. He went for his under-arm gun. That set Thad off, and he went for his sidegun" *Sniff!* "Jethro shot first, but Thad stayed on his feet long enough to shoot second. They stood within twenty feet of each other, and both seemed to take deadly aim." *Sniff!* "It was deadly enough too, because both of them fell, Cedrick face down, Jethro face up. Both lay still."

CLAYBROOK tossed a taunting glance at Hutto, then faced his witness. Mr. Weed, was defendant Malone near either body?"

Weed sleeved his nose and nodded. "Yes, sir, Mr. Claybrook, he was. Not right at first, of course, but a few seconds after Fogg fell. While everybody was looking on, sort of silent, Malone stepped up to where Jethro Fogg was lying face up. Malone spits and says. 'Dead at last, eh?' He spits again and says, 'Well, that's fine. And just to show you how I feel about a dead dog, you can take that.'

"With those words he spits and gives Fogg a hard kick. He's not satisfied with just one kick. A wild look comes into his eyes, and hauls off and gives Fogg a kick that's got thunder in it. Ribs crack and crunch, Malone kicks so hard. Men groan, it's so sort of horrible, Malone standing there like a man gone crazy, kicking Jethro's body, spitting, too, and calling names. What makes it even more pitiful—"

"Object," fumed Hutto. "What this man's sentiments may have been has nothing to do with evidence. He has told his story; let him keep his sorrow and pity to himself."

Steele leaned forward. "Consarn you, Hutto, when a lawyer objects

like you're doing, it's a sure sign thar's something to be told that he don't want told." He nodded at Weed. "Go on with your story."

"That's about it, Judge," said Weed.

"Well, by thunder, go on until that's completely it."

"You were going to say something about what made it even more pitiful," Claybrook prompted.

"He was going to explain why he's got sniffles." said Hutto. "He was going to say he was so affected by seeing a dead body with its slats kicked in that he's been weeping ever since. I'm sure nobody wants to hear it."

"Why are you so sure, Hutto?" asked Steele.

"Professor Hutto is sure he doesn't want this jury to hear it," said Claybrook.

"Mr. Claybrook can speak his own mind," retorted Hutto. "I shall do likewise for mine. Kicking a dead body was disgraceful, of course, but public decency does not require public narration of it. Why Mr. Claybrook had this defendant indicted is beyond my comprehension. Defendant's conduct has been reprehensible, I admit. I should say, he has disqualified himself for association with decent and respectable people, but that is all.

"That he hated Fogg and Cedrick is evident, but hatred is not murder. That he stirred up hatred and fear between Fogg and Cedrick is also evident, but tale-bearing is not murder. If Flat Creek should unceremoniously chase this man out of town, I'd say *well done*. But meanness is one thing, while murder is quite another."

"I'm sure Professor Hutto feels better now," said Claybrook sneeringly. "I object to personalities, suh," retorted Hutto.

Claybrook glanced up at Steele. "May I proceed, your honor?"

Steele had grown proud of his man Claybrook. "Go right ahead, Wade."

CLAYBROOK leveled his eyes at Weed. "You were going to say something about what made it even more pitiful."

"Now, suh, I must again object. This witness has nothing more to add, except gruesome details of what he has already related."

"Set down, Hutto," Steele said coldly.

Claybrook nodded at Weed. "Finish your story."

Weed sleeved his nose. "I started to say what made it even more pitiful, Malone's kicking Jethro like that, was that Jethro wasn't quite dead."

"Object!" Hutto shouted without rising. He threw his weight onto an elbow and pounded his table. "This witness has turned out to be a scandalmonger. Finding eager ears are consuming his bloodthirsty yarn, he's adding these harrowing details—"

"Hutto, you was told to set down; that meant you'd objected enough."

Claybrook twisted his mouth in a crooked smile. "If your honor please, Professor Hutto realizes that his client is a dead fish. He's objecting, so he can remind himself afterwards that he put up a noisy fight."

"I resent that insult, suh."

"It was merely a comment on human

behavior," replied Claybrook. Once more he faced his witness. "Mr. Weed, why do you say Jethro Fogg was not dead when Malone kicked him?"

"Well, sir," Weed answered, "Jethro was lying there as still as a dead man. I *thought* he was dead, and I suppose—"

"There's no law against supposing," Claybrook cut in. "But just tell what you know."

"Well, sir, I said Malone kicked Jethro's ribs once. Not very hard that first time. But next time it was like a mule's kick. And that time Jethro groaned, rose on his elbows, turned half-over, then dropped back. He didn't move any more after that."

Claybrook glanced up at Steele. "That's all from Mr. Weed, your honor."

Steele glared at Hutto.

Hutto got up. "Yes, suh, your honor, I do want to cross-examine." He came round and confronted Weed angrily. "So your name is Green Weed, is it?"

"It is, sir."

"But you're more commonly known as Sneeze Weed, are you not?"

"I've been called that, yes."

"Are you sure that alleged movement by Jethro Fogg was not caused by one of your sneezes?"

Steele leaned forward. "Consarn you, Hutto, get over thar and set down; I ought to fine you for contempt of court. By thunder, if you bat an eye, I'll have you jailed."

Hutto turned and moved to his seat.

"Next witness, Claybrook."

Claybrook nodded. "Call Boaz Welfare."

Welfare, a pink-faced roly-poly, came in and looked along his nose at Claybrook. "What do you want to know?"

Claybrook returned his look with scorn. "Whatever it should be, you no doubt could supply it."

"I know a few things," Welfare assured him haughtily.

"You know you are coroner of Flat Creek;—you know what your duties are and that you do them without fear or favor; also, that last Wednesday one Jethro Fogg was shot and afterwards kicked, that his body was taken to Ab Weaselhouse's undertaking establishment where you, Weaselhouse and Dr. Robbin Lake performed an a-topsy to determine what caused Fogg's death, such being among your duties as coroner of Flat Creek."

Welfare's lips crimped for a moment. He said angrily, "That word *a-topsy* is yours, not mine."

STEELE pinned his eyes savagely on Claybrook. "See hyar, Wade, can't you prove your point by somebody besides this puffed-up toad?"

"I think so, your honor," Claybrook replied.

"Then do so, by thunder."

Claybrook nodded at a deputy. "Take this toad out and bring in Dr. Lake."

A large man of solemn demeanor superseded Welfare.

"You are Dr. Robbin Lake?" asked Claybrook.

"I am, sir."

"Did you assist in performing an autopsy on our late Jethro Fogg?"

"Yes."

"What caused his death?"

"A broken rib had been driven into his heart."

Claybrook sat down. "That is our case, your honor."

"Now, suh," said Hutto, coming round and facing Dr. Lake, "you failed to state that thrusting of a broken rib caused death. I take that to mean you reached no conclusion as to what caused death. Correct, suh?"

"Apparently you only heard what you wanted to hear," replied Dr. Lake. "My conclusion was that death resulted from that rib-thrust which,

evidence showed, had been attended by terrific blows from a man's booted foot."

"Had Fogg also been shot?"

"Yes."

"Mortally wounded?"

"I should judge so, yes."

Hutto backed away and sat down. "That is all, suh."

When Dr. Lake had retired, Hutto got up again. "If your honor please, I move for a directed verdict of not guilty. Jethro Fogg was mortally wounded, to all appearances, he was dead. Defendant Malone kicked him, not with intent to kill but merely with intend to desecrate a dead body. Without murderous intent, there can be no murder. Moreover, Fogg would have died anyhow within a few seconds. Had defendant wished to commit murder, he could have done so before that fateful day. He had no thought of killing Jethro Fogg. It has been so often said that it hardly needs repeating: *Actus non facit, nisi mens sit rea,* which means, an act does not make a man guilty, unless he be so in intention."

"Your argument sounds mighty puny to me, by thunder," Steele responded with repressed fury. "Claybrook, what's your answer?"

Claybrook got up calmly. "May it please your honor, our law-giving ancestors had an answer to that argument. *Mortem festinare est caedere,* which means, to hasten death is to kill. When Spit Malone kicked what he thought was a dead body, his acts and his utterances evidenced a depraved and murderous state of mind. It was his bad luck that a man whom he thought dead was still alive. He challenges fate. *Fatum id est, qui derisor cum replicas.* It is fate who replies with laughter."

Steele nodded at his jurors. "Fetch in a verdict."

Minutes later their rough-textured foreman announced grimly, "Guilty, Judge. First-degree murder."

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THE PASSING of HAWK McDADE

by Edward Garner

Bloodhound O'Grew was a lawman who
Stayed on the trail of his man.
He got a lift as he tracked and sniffed
For a knave of an outlaw clan.
He never lost, nor counted cost
In a fight with a renegade.
One fine spring day there came his way
A heel known as Hawk McDade.

Now this Hawk McDade had never made
An honest cent in his life.
He had stolen, killed, and his life was filled
With stickups, saloons, and strife.
His eyes were slits that gave men fits
When they looked in their hard, cold blaze,
And his strong, square chin had a reek of sin
That was sired in an evil maze.

The wicked Hawk would never balk
At sin of the blackest hue,
And one day robbed, while the banker sobbed,
The vault of the Bank of Stue.
O'Grew was riled, and shortly piled
On his horse for the hectic chase,
And his stirred blood boiled to look the soiled
Outlaw, McDade, in the face.

On the road ahead the fleet Hawk sped,
While Bloodhound rode behind.
And Bloodhound thought of the prey he sought,
And his thoughts were plumb unkind.
The Bloodhound gained, and the Hawk was pained,
And sang, though a bit off key,
Of a rose a-bloom, beside a tomb,
Of a love that used to be.

Then Bloodhound's eyes felt tears arise
At a song so strangely sad,
Sung by a rogue in a haunting brogue
Of a love that he once had had.
He softened some, but his look was glum,
And he shook his head, and made
A move and drew, and the gunshot slew
The outlaw called Hawk McDade.

Then Bloodhound said, "The Hawk is dead,
He rests in his last repose.
He now is through, and it's all due
To his song of the tomb and rose.
I had to shoot when the hill called Boot
Came into my mind, and I
Pictured how dear would a rose appear
On the grave where the Hawk would lie."

★

THE LANDLOOTER

by E. E. Clement

Betty Lane had been brought up back East, and was full of scientific ideas about how to improve ranching methods. But Professor Warren wasn't able to teach her two vital things—how to keep from being swindled by a crooked lawman, and how to keep from being murdered by same.

THERE WERE times when a man had to say things straight, and that time certainly had come. Mike Morris looked squarely into the eyes of the new owner of the small Double-L spread and tried to take the brittle edge from the words.

"Plantin' crops may make sense," he acknowledged, "but fencin' the south end of the range shore don't. There'll be no fence. Not while I'm bossin' the outfit."

He knew at once that the words were a mistake. Betty Lane rocked on her heels flexing a small riding whip behind her back. Her eyes were as cold as the sodden gust of late autumn wind that swooped through the open gate.

"Your job is to do as I say," she snapped. "We'll have to fence to keep the herds out of the field, and starting next summer we'll grow and store winter fodder. A new era's come to the range."

Mike nearly choked. *A new era's come to the range!* Who was this slim young Eastern girl to come and tell them ranch business? "Where'd you get ideas like that?"

"From Professor Warren, the agricultural economist." Fury shook her body as a slow grin crept over Norris' face.

"Last winter the range lost half its cattle, didn't it?" she challenged savagely.

Mike nodded soberly. "It was a bad winter."

Betty's voice rose. "It was bad because the cattle weren't properly fed. The summer before was dry, and the grazing poor. The herds were half-starved before the snows came, and the drifts piled so high the cattle just didn't have the strength to forage for themselves. After this winter we'll provide feed. It's more humane—and it's good business."

During the long explanation Betty's voice had dropped. She ended almost apologetically, the way she had spoken several times since she arrived from the East a week before. Norris studied her thoughtfully. The silken softness of her skin, not yet tanned by a western sun, made Betty Lane seem fragile, childlike. Yet in her eyes and in her bearing there were the depths of womanhood. On the surface she was brittle, defiant and bitter, as though she had been wounded deeply and fought back in blindness and pain. Mike tried a new tack, softening his tone: "There's other fields to fence and plant, but you can't fence the south range. The winds from the north come swoopin' down the valley—"

Betty interrupted him. "Professor

Warren—" she began. Mike broke in. "Maybe there's some things Prof. Warren and the new era ain't taken into account. The West teaches lessons of its own."

The contemptuous laugh that rocked the girl stung at his mind. "I suppose you're one of these stubborn Westerners who thinks an Easterner knows nothing merely because he presses his clothes. I'll fence where and when I please."

She had swung into the saddle. Mike's hands tightened in stubborn anger. "Not while I'm here you won't."

"Which makes the situation clear-cut," Betty flared. "I'll hire a new man."

Mike watched as she wheeled through the gate and galloped down the dusty road toward Lockport. He turned and strode back toward the bunkhouse where Sandy Gruel still stood by the over-loaded wagon.

Mike looked around at the weather-scarred buildings of the Double L. Underfoot the ground was as hard-baked as a Missouri mud turtle's back. A few gaunt cows had straggled up near the tool sheds. Mike saw it all through angered eyes. A second summer of drouth had devasted the Salt River range. It was a poor legacy at best that Steve Lane had left to his niece; and now that another winter was at hand, she'd need more than an Eastern professor's new eras to hold it together.

SANDY GRUEL was wiping the straggling edges of a greying mustache out of his mouth. "That ain't no way to handle wimmin," he observed quietly. "Wimmin and cows has to be shooed gently."

Mike Norris flared. "Women," he snorted. "Who understands 'em?" He stood back, appraising the boxes and barrels that loaded the wagon. "What kind of seeds are they?"

"She says there's timothy, barley, red clover, oats." Sandy counted them off on finger tips.

"Do anything else in town this morning?"

"She spent an hour in Sheriff Kreb's office."

Mike started. He had known that Sheriff Joiner Kreb would try to worm his way into Betty's confidence, but he hadn't expected it so soon. Working behind the protection of his badge, Joiner Kreb had maneuvered his land grabbing schemes until he had become a power in Lockport and on the Salt River range. Now he used that power to perpetuate himself in office. Trusting Joiner Kreb was like throwing a little mouse down a rattler's hole. Mike looked away toward a faint foam of dust as Betty topped a ridge in the road.

"Mebbe she'll find more things Prof. Warren and the new era ain't writ about," he muttered, striding away toward the blacksmith shed.

Norris' thoughts churned moodily as he worked the bellows against the forge flame. Joiner Kreb would encourage the fencing of the south range. Kreb would encourage anything that would bring total bankruptcy to the Double-L, and play it into his hands. For years the renegade lawman had tried to filch the ranch from Steve Lane.

And playing up to Betty Lane had been a mistake, Mike acknowledged. Rightly enough, she couldn't be blamed for not knowin' who her friends were; now she'd never listen to sensible reasoning.

Mike was still working when the late afternoon sun cast a slender shadow across the floor. He looked up to find Tall Tom Hall hovering in the doorway. Mike's eyes narrowed. Tall Tom was one of Kreb's gunslicks—a thin, stoop-shouldered string of a man. "So skinny," Sandy Gruel once said, "his shadow 'ud shave a rattlesnake."

Mike saw the insolent twist of the gunhawk's lips. "I've come to take yore job," Tall Tom spat. "Yuh're fired."

Mike's head snapped forward. So Betty had kept her threat, and Joiner Kreb had fed one of his sidewinders into her hands.

"Betty Lane can fire her own help," Norris rapped. "I'm stayin' till then." Through the dusty light of the shed Mike saw Tall Tom's clawlike hands curved over a low-slung gunbelt. Mike's own hands were still encased in heavy, grease-stiffened leather gauntlets—a protection against the heat of the forge. He'd be no match in a quick draw.

Tall Tom saw all this as he swayed into the shed. "A winged shoulder may learn yuh manners." The claws streaked down. Beside him Mike saw the bellows tilted against the soot and dust of the forge. With an explosive hand Mike crushed downward, sending a blast of blinding grime into the gunhawk's face.

Then Mike weaved to one side as Tall Tom backed from the shed, fighting blindness and firing wild. Mike leaped forward, and with a quick snap of Tall Tom's wrist, sent the gun thudding to the floor.

The next instant he stepped outside and found himself looking into the ugly muzzles of Joiner Kreb's sixguns.

Joiner Kreb was a hulk of a man, standing well over six feet—210 pounds of beefy strength. Mike saw the sheriff's face bob forward, the hair closely cropped giving an odd egg-like hugeness to his head. Folds of cheek-fat made deep caverns of eye sockets from which beads as calculating as a ferret's regarded Norris.

"Thought there might be trouble," Sheriff Kreb whinnied, gesturing with the guns. "Assault charges should be good for a month in the jailhouse."

Mike looked from the bulky sheriff to Tall Tom, still coughing and clutching at his throat. Betty had heard the shots and came ashen-faced from the house.

Mike summed it up.

JOINER KREB wanted him out of the way, and Kreb could make any trumped-up charge stick. On the owlhoot, he'd be of little value to Betty Lane, much as she despised his protection; but in Sheriff Joiner Kreb's jailhouse he'd be no help at all.

Tall Tom was still to one side of him, a little to the side and in front of the Sheriff. Mike leaped suddenly forward, wheeling Tall Tom in front of him, and hurled the slim gunman full in Kreb's face.

Sheriff Kreb remained rock-like against the impact of his gunslick, but the maneuver threw his arm off as Mike rounded the corner of the shed. Betty's horse was still saddled by the corral, and Mike leaped for leather, heading toward the open range just as Kreb's slugs ripped at the weather scarred rails of the enclosure.

When he reached the hills, Mike doubled back, laying a new trail for the Sheriff's men to follow; then he took once more to the craggy heights. From a lookout crag high over the valley, he watched the last of the coppery edges of the earth give way before the flowing darkness of night. A cold sullen wind whipped early winter anger about the crags.

Silenty Mike Norris cursed the turn that had forced him on the owlhoot. After five years as tophand for old Steve Lane, he felt a responsibility toward the Double-L; and a responsibility too toward its new owner, Betty Lane. Mike hunched back in a recess among the rocks.

Sandy Gruel was right, he acknowledged dryly; that was no way to handle women.

A week later, Mike edged silently in the darkness from the Double-L corral toward a light in the window of the old ranch house. Seven days on the owlhoot had left him haggard and weary. A bristly stubble of beard aggravated the uneasiness of his thoughts. Joiner Kreb's posse had given him no

rest; day after day they had trailed him through the hills.

"They're shore anxious to learn me manners," Mike muttered.

Reaching the farmhouse he inched along the wall, moving toward the window. Then for one quick moment he rose and peered into the musty, rag-carpeted room. He dropped back cursing.

Inside Joiner Kreb was counting out greenbacks under the light, thick-slobbered thumbs straightening the hard creases of the bills. Betty Lane was hunched over the huge desk, pen scratching as she signed the note.

Mike squirmed along the wall, storming at the shackles that kept him in hiding. Joiner Kreb wasn't making a loan. It was an old land-grabbing trick; Kreb loaned money and his gun-slicks did the rest. When the note came due, a corpse couldn't pay off. Betty Lane wasn't signing an acknowledgement of debt; she had penned her name to her death warrant.

Three of Kreb's sidewinders were around in front, scuffing the boards of the veranda as Norris moved cat-like along the wall. A boiling impulse seized him to storm inside and cram the roll of dirty bills down Joiner Kreb's porpoise throat; but reason prevailed. A dead man couldn't save Betty Lane, and neither could a prisoner.

Around the corner of the house Kreb had moved to the door. Mike could hear muffled voices talking low. Anger and frustration gnawed at his mind like the sudden jerk of leather reins against the quick of finger tips. He could hear Kreb and his gunmen moving away from the porch, and waited until thudding hoofbeats receded in the darkness. Mike straightened, hoping that he hadn't come too late. Betty Lane had bought herself a peck of real trouble. And an older worry crowded itself to the front. He glanced overhead at the crawling darkness of low-hung snow clouds. A lot of fence could be strung in a week.

BETTY LANE was still hunched at the desk, amber shafts from the old majolica lamp furrowing shadows in her oval face. Mike Norris stood just inside the screen door, the warmth of the room emphasizing the weariness of his long hideout in the hills. But there was neither warmth nor fear in Betty's face as she turned.

Mike drove straight to the point. "I listened outside," he acknowledged. "Why are you borrowing from Joiner Kreb?"

Betty stood up. "So now you've turned peeping Tom." She glanced down at the roll of bills still on her desk. "It's no business of yours, but fencing takes money—more money than I had."

Mike fell back. A cloud of worry agitated his face. "So you've fenced then?"

Betty nodded. "The south range. Half way across to the old line shack. No thanks to you and the help you might have given."

The cool sting of the words whipped a savage roar in Mike's head. "That fence is comin' out," he rapped. "I'll rip it out barb by barb." This arrogant slim girl needed protection, and she was too stubborn to know it.

"Which shouldn't add much to the charges Sheriff Kreb has against you."

"Resistin' an officer ain't a bad charge," Mike defended, puzzled by the queerness of the girl's tone. "He seems to want me bad, combin' the hills all week."

For long moments Betty appraised him in the lamplight. "Tall Tom was killed the day you escaped," she said flatly. "Joiner Kreb has a warrant against you for murder."

"You know that ain't a just charge. You was there." Mike's head snapped forward.

Betty turned back to the desk. "In a way it is just." Mike thought he saw a slight shrug move the girl's slender shoulders. It was enough to break the wall that held anger in check.

"May as well be hanged for a wolf as a lamb," he rasped. His hand whipped out and snatched the roll of bills from the desk. "Meanwhile I'm takin' these back to Joiner Kreb. I'll ram 'em down his oily throat and bring back yore note."

Mike watched Betty grow white with fury. Her small hand snapped into an open drawer and came out steeled to a sixgun. "A likely story," she screamed, "put 'em back!"

Mike backed stubbornly away. The ashen fear of desperation shone in Betty's face, but her voice dropped. "First murderer, now thief. Father once said Uncle Steve was a good judge of cattle and a rotten judge of men." She gestured again with the gun.

Norris continued backing toward the door. It was a desperate bluff against a frightened, half-hysterical girl. His head twisted as the gun roared and a charring flame tore at the muscles of his arm. The fingers of his hand convulsed and the bills dropped to the floor. Hysteria fanned Betty's eyes as she swayed against a chair. The next moment the screen was flung open and Joiner Kreb's lumpish bulk filled the doorway. Betty had neglected to date the note she had given.

Mike took advantage of the brief second before the Sheriff reacted. Leaping forward he fanned his hat down over the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. Then he shied along the wall a split second after a slug blasted against the wall where he had been. In the darkness, Mike heard Joiner Kreb fumbling with the lamp.

From the porch Mike could hear Kreb's gunslicks coming on the run. He drifted farther along the wall. In another moment the room would again be flooded with light. Kreb's paid gunmen would be anxious to throw their hatespawned lead—just for the pure love of killing. And Joiner Kreb, himself, would have no scruples against using Betty Lane as a shield. In a gun duel like that, Mike wouldn't have a prayer.

One pain-seared arm still hung limp and helpless at his side. Betty Lane's bullet had imbedded itself deep in the muscle alongside the bone. Mike Norris felt a dizziness stealing over him—a light, uncertain, oily feeling as though his movements were brittle and undirected, and he knew that he was losing blood fast. Moving along the wall his leg bumped against the window ledge.

Mike was suddenly galvanized into action. Flinging the window to the top, he kicked out the screen with vicious jabs of his boot and dropped to the ground outside, just as stabs of light flooded the room.

He could hear Kreb's gunslicks doubling back from the porch, but he melted quickly into the darkness. Acquainted with every inch of the Double-L yards, Mike soon secured his horse, and again set out for the hills.

AS HE RODE Mike fashioned a tourniquet for his arm, and finally succeeded in stopping the flow of blood. When he reached his hideout, high in the crags, he built a fire to the leeward of the rocks and boiled a small tin of water. Then he set out probing for the bullet.

The hours burned slowly past as he worked cumbersomely at his arm. A cold, early winter wind whipped around the rocks to lash flame shadows against the night. Several times he lapsed into unconsciousness, but recovered and continued the task. At last, the bullet was retrieved; Mike bathed and bandaged the wound and curled near the fire to sleep.

Mike awakened stiff and cold the next morning. His arm was swollen and aching, and sent needle stabs of pain ricocheting into his body. The world he looked upon was laden with the promise of an early storm.

During the night, the wind had be-

come colder; and now, although the sun should have risen, the valley below was shrouded in half-darkness. Overhead, grey soap-and-water clouds twisted turbulently across the sky.

"Snow clouds," Mike appraised. "And comin' in fast." He turned and regarded the leaden horizon far to the north of him. The approaching storm would change his plans. If he stayed in the hills, he'd have to run the risk of being snow-trapped. Then, too, his arm needed attention and needed it bad. Down on the range he'd at least have a gambling chance against Joiner Kreb and his phoney charges.

Mike rode down toward the Double-L, the raw wind stabbing at his face and arms. A light stinging snow had begun to fall long before he reached the Lane ranch.

Mike approached the storm-outlined buildings cautiously, leaving his horse by the lower corral, but finally found that only Sandy Gruel was at home.

Sandy worked deftly on his arm, cleansing and rebandaging the wound. It felt better when the old cowhand had finished. While fashioning a sling, Sandy spoke soberly: "Yuh're in a hard spot. Yuh're buckin' somethin' that ain't to be bucked."

Weariness and anger fought for dominance in Norris' mind. "If Betty Lane wasn't such a stubborn, high-and-mighty, quick-flarin' little whippet—" Mike broke off under Sandy's probing gaze.

"Looks like yore feelin's run deep," Sandy observed sagely. "Betty Lane ain't that bad; I been learnin' things this last week. She's an orphan kid—her paw died when she was ten. The goin's been pretty rough, and she's been kicked around 'til she just don't trust nobody. When you was gettin' high and mighty, she flared too."

Sandy waited for Norris to absorb the thought and continued: "Some ways, things is yore fault. An' Joiner Kreb's liable to make 'em a heap sight worse. You can't back out now and leave Betty to them human wolves." The old cowboy sucked hard at the words. Mike nodded. "Where's Betty now?"

"Gone down with Kreb to inspect the south fence—before the storm."

Mike exploded out of the chair. Sandy Gruel hadn't been told of the loan Betty had made. His face became agitated as Mike spoke.

"This storm's just the set-up Kreb would want," Mike concluded grimly. He pulled a worn mackinaw from a wooden peg. "Wouldn't be much evidence left when the thaws come; and with Betty out of his way, there'd be nothin' to keep the land-grabbin' vulture from takin' the Double-L when his note's due."

IT WAS A grey world that Mike Norris looked upon, when he stepped out of the bunkhouse. While he had been inside, the storm had gradually unleashed its fury; and now the swooping, sullen winds rattled stridently around the old buildings of the Double-L. Far out on the range, the wind swirled pockets of snow like rolling dust; and the paste-grey clouds seemed to press even closer to the ground than before. Mike peered into the shadowed greyness to the north. The worst of the storm's violence, he knew, was still to come.

Mike rode downwind with the storm, hunching forward in the saddle, his mackinaw collar choked in around his neck. Even then it was small protection from the cruelty of the elements. The wind whipped icy needles that numbed his body. Particles of snow clung to the muscles of his face and froze there, adding to discomfort. The temperature was dropping fast, as the full force of the blizzard stormed in from the north. Mike could see only a few yards in the dim swirling whiteness around him.

It was a fool's errand. Somewhere on the range was Betty Lane, caught in the vicious web that Joiner Kreb had fashioned—trapped, too, in the maw of

the elements. And in the swirling, roaring whiteness around him it would be possible to pass within a few yards and never discover her.

Mike's wounded arm hung numbed and useless in the crude sling that Sandy had made. He tried to exercise it to relieve the cold, deadening flow that gripped the muscles, but finally stopped to ease the racking jabs of pain that followed. Suddenly he hunched forward in the saddle. Just ahead a shadow loomed in the darkness. Momentarily, he drove his mount forward and to one side of the shadow, then crossed back over the apparition's trail. In the maneuver, he had lost sight of it and now it was nowhere to be found.

Warily Norris doubled back again, and this time the shadow loomed just ahead of him. Slipping his holster free of the mackinaw edge, Mike froze one numbed gauntleted hand to the handle of his gun and drove straight toward the blizzard wraith. Then, suddenly, as he neared and vision became more distinct, his hand relaxed. The shadow was a riderless horse.

For a moment as he rode alongside the riderless mount the blizzard seemed to reach a crescendo of fury, lashing its full force across the range. Granite lines hardened Mike's face. The horse belonged to Betty Lane. The story it told was terse and tragic. Either Betty lay under one of the mounting drifts, the victim of a treacherous gun blast; or was now dazed and helpless, wandering the range. Her doom was sealed. Untutored in the ways of the range, she would try to fight her way against the storm back to the ranch house.

Suddenly, too, Mike knew the reason that had held him fast to the Double-L. It was a deeper feeling than loyalty that had carried him on when Betty had spurned his efforts. He straightened rock-like in the saddle. His eyes swept the grey world around him, some of the cold savagery of the blizzard in their depths. Downwind, endeavoring to save himself, was Joiner Kreb.

Mike continued his plodding course. All thoughts of self-preservation were gone. The storm had swallowed his back trail; only vengeance and hatred carried him on.

AS HE RODE, Mike endeavored to certain his position. He was traveling in a straight line, he knew; instinctively his mount would drift before the storm.

Joiner Kreb, he further reasoned, would try to make it to the old line shack on the edge of the Double-L, the point to which Betty had fenced. Wherever he struck the fence, Joiner Kreb and the line shack would be to his left.

Mike's horse suddenly stumbled and shied. Reaching down, Mike found that he had reached the fence. Painfully, he forced his mount crosswind toward the line shack, reaching out now and then for the barbed wire to keep on course. The powerful roar of the blizzard stormed in his head. Then again his horse stumbled, and Mike peered forward. A guant herd of Double-L cattle had drifted with the storm until they found further progress blocked by the fence. The leaders had sunk to their knees; in a few moments they would freeze to death, and the others piling up behind them faced the same fate.

Mike debated the prospects. He could alight and tear out enough of the fence to get the leaders started again. Once on the move, the herd would stand a chance of riding out the blizzard. But once he alighted, there would be no chance of fighting his way back through the plodding herd to his horse. To save the herd would mean chancing it on foot to the line shack.

Mike swung down, his boots sinking deep into the dry, powdery drifts. Stumbling forward over the backs of the leaders he seized the barbed wire and tugged against the staples that held it in line. Mike dropped to his

knees as he worked his way along the barrier. The barbs slashed gaping holes in his gauntlet, cutting his hand. Finally he found a place where the wires were spliced, and painfully unwound the connection, an opening, fifty feet across, had been made.

Struggling to his feet, Mike stumbled into the herd, forcing the leaders to their feet. Emptying his gun into the air to arouse the herd, he finally had them moving again. Bit by bit, the leaders melted into the darkness as they resumed their slow plodding route, their backs hunched against the fury of coldness that whip-lashed the range. The herd would weather it out.

Mike straggled along the fence, his whole body numbed by exhaustion and cold. Deep drifts made every step an achievement in itself. Finally he dropped to hands and knees to escape from the blinding sting of the snow. Drowsiness was creeping over him. Dimly he felt the driving rawness of the storm above him. The drifts underneath were luxuriously soft, seemingly warm. But hatred lashed his mind again and he inched forward.

Then, in the whirling wind, the shadow of the line shack bulked before him. Mike continued to crawl forward. He could see a wisp of smoke rise from the small chimney pipe and immediately disappear in the roaring snow. Joiner Kreb had made it to safety.

Near the door, he floundered over something soft and his hand groped and recoiled. Betty Lane lay half-buried in the drifts that edged the shack. Instinctively she had gone downwind with the blizzard and reached the line shack only to be thrown back into the maw of the storm by Joiner Kreb's blinding greed. Her hands were weights of ice as Mike Norris touched them. Her face was cold and deathlike, but there was still life—a small rasping of breath. Mike carried her closer to the door and lumbered to his feet.

His hand was still numbed, but now the fingers were frozen bands of steel gripping the cold ivory of his gun. With a thunderous foot Mike drove the door open and stepped inside.

Huddled in front of a rusted potbellied stove Joiner Kreb started forward, flinging off blankets, then froze before Norris' smouldering challenge.

"Law of self-preservation's the only law here," Kreb whinnied. "Yuh can holster yore gun; I ain't after yuh."

Even the slight warmth of the room was having its effect on Mike. Shadows danced in the dim corners of the shack. The warmth seemed to drain the energy from his limbs—to make movements uncertain. "What about Betty?"

Joiner Kreb sensed the drowsiness that crept over his quarry; a pinpoint glint streaked his eyes. "We got separated. I tried to save her. A tenderfoot does bad things."

A roar stormed through Norris' head. "Yuh're lying, Kreb," he flung out harshly. "Yuh lie like a rustler's stooge. Betty's outside—froze to death mebbe. Yuh turned her out—turned her out to die because of yore vulture greed."

FOR LONG moments Norris teetered against the draining warmth around him. He'd never gunned a man down—somehow he couldn't do it now; yet he knew how it had to be. Much longer outside, and Betty would be a goner for sure.

"Yore hands are warm, Kreb; mine's cold. I'm holsterin' this cutter. When it strikes leather start pullin' fast, 'cause I'm comin' out blastin'."

Kreb didn't wait until Mike's gun touched leather. As Mike's hand dropped, the pompous Sheriff leaped forward. His rocklike weight spun Mike across the room, crashing his head against the flimsy side of the shack. Kreb's gun blasted and Mike felt the tug of the bullet through his mackinaw. Dazedly Mike saw the mountainous bulk of the renegade crashing toward him, gun raised to smash him to senselessness.

In a final effort Mike triggered at

the charging shadow and saw Kreb spin about, cursing and clutching at his arm. The lawman flipped his gun to fire again, but his fingers relaxed as Mike triggered shot after shot into the swaying, cursing shadow. Finally, with Joiner Kreb dropped rocklike and still a crash that rocked the tiny building, to the floor.

As the gunsmoke filtered out, Mike's head cleared. Bringing Betty inside, he summoned all of his strength, working tirelessly rubbing snow against her face and hands. Finally he felt a tiny, prickling warmth steal back along the smooth white skin. Wrapped in blankets on the bunk Betty stirred to momentary consciousness and dropped into a troubled sleep.

Hours later, when she awakened, she seemed stronger. The storm had subsided and the late afternoon sun streamed golden shafts of light through the cracks of the line-shack wall.

"I broke the fence," Norris said stolidly after they had exchanged experiences. "So long as cattle can stay on their feet, they'll drift with a storm—weather it out. When a fence stops 'em, they hunker down and die; few more blizzards like this and all yore cows will be vulture bait."

Mike Norris tried to keep the stubborness out of his tone. "That's the thing Prof. Warren ain't writ about. I'll get you home and be ridin' out."

Betty turned her head to face him directly. There were soft clouds in her eyes. "There's no need to go."

"There's some say I killed Tall Tom," Mike shrugged.

Betty glanced down the blanket-covered heap in the corner and shuddered. "There's no one to say it now." Her eyes were level. Freeing one hand she slipped it against Mike's snow-bitten, barb-stung palm. "Sandy said my feelings ran too deep," she murmured.

Mike's head bobbed forward. A slow grin creased the frown from his face. "Sandy say that?" he questioned; "he said the same thing about me."

He looked long at Betty's oval face. There was no mistaking the message her eyes held. "The West teaches a hard lesson," he said slowly.

Betty laughed. She pulled his worn hand toward her. "Hard?" she questioned. She laughed again. The shadows were gone from her eyes. "Sometimes I think it's rather nice."

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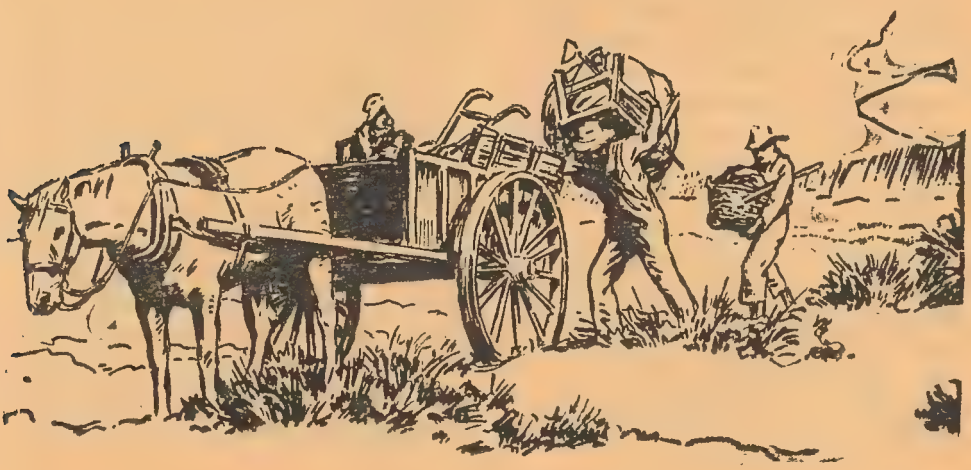

JUSTICE FOR TWO

BY LAURAN PAINE

Novelet of a Changing West

The real bad days had passed, but trouble was not unknown in Arrowhead. There were still men around like Cliff Ketchum, who thought that Indians had no rights whatsoever, and took it as a personal affront when the marshal tried to protect them. And Marshal Les Brown knew that his championing of a poor Indian family's rights would lead to powder-smoke . . .

LES BROWN knew Arrowhead as well as most of the oldtimers. Some features of it he knew a darned sight better, like the Coy-Clanton feud and the killing of Charley Overholt. He was the law at Arrowhead: Town Marshal Brown. Les was getting up close to forty, and getting a little conscious of it too; but still lean, lank and hard, with a slow, thoughtful, patient way about him, like a good hunting dog. He knew his business, and he knew the other folks knew he knew it; so he wasn't tense and wary like a younger man would have been. But he still cherished the dream of a small ranch, somewhere back in the juniper-studded hills, where a man could relax and ride, watch his calves grow, and not have to run loud-mouthed cowboys, loaded with liquor, into jail or out of town every Saturday night.

Arrowhead was pretty orderly and law-abiding now, and it had been for about a year. There was no serious trouble—as in the old days of gun-law and free-for-alls—any more. Marshal Brown even had time to teach a little Indian kid, who hung around the office, how to tie lariat knots like the Turk's-Head, and such.

With the warm spring sun on his back, he'd sat on the checked old bench that some long-departed predecessor had built along the front of the combination jail and Marshal's office. The little urchin, dark as mahogany, with stringy black hair and beady black eyes and a too large mouth, was as quick as a chipmunk. He was a dirty little thing, but that wasn't his fault. His people were converted, 'civilised', Indians of an almost-extinct Southwestern tribe of desert wanderers. Bathing, like a lot of other 'civilised' blessings, were inexplicable to them; and Les Brown didn't feel it his duty to try and change them. He contented himself teaching the kid

Cliff Ketchum's father had wrested this land from Indians and held it against range hogs. Now Cliff considered himself above the law—particularly with Indians.

how to be a cowboy, which the little chap wanted to know above everything else. In fact those beady, alert, black eyes looked with complete adoration at the tall, lean Marshal because Les was, first, a top-notch cowboy.

The Summer seemed destined to see nothing more exciting for Marshal Brown than the daily sojourns with knots, pieces of leather, and crude dust-drawings of horses' legs, eyes and backs. Each in its turn was a progressive step forward for the attentive, solemn little Indian boy who listened patiently and learned fast. And then came Cliff Ketchum and trouble.

Cliff was an older man, about Brown's age— A likable enough fellow, at times, but somewhat arrogant and overbearing. Cliff's father had been one of the early pioneers. Old Ketchum had sweated and stormed, and sweated some more, until he had carved out the big Musselshell ranch. Then, satisfied and contented, he died and left the whole thing to Cliff, his only child. Thus, Cliff Ketchum was a big man in the territory.

The trouble started one warm, sunny afternoon when the little Indian boy

brought in a wizened old man with him.

"He my gran'father. He old man. He farm along creek. Musselshell cows break down fences, ride over beans. No more beans. I tell him you my compadre. We come talk you."

IT WAS plain enough to Les Brown. Some Musselshell critters had trampled the old fellow's bean crop, and the old man wanted something done about it. He was angry, and Les didn't blame him; but it was going to be hard to explain that, in an open range county, a man had to build a good enough fence to keep cattle *out*. The cowman wasn't responsible if his cattle broke through a fence.

Les sighed and rubbed his angular jaw thoughtfully. The open range law had been all right when the land was young; but nowadays, it wasn't fair to the little farmer. Most cowmen knew this, but there it was and Marshal Brown couldn't change it. He motioned the wiry old Indian to a chair and, for a moment, avoided the bright old bird-like eyes that swept over him—his office, his gun and his face all in an instant, reading all the meaning he wanted to read, in that sweeping glance.

"Pancho, you'll have to explain to your grandfather that he has to build a strong fence. Real strong fence. If he can't keep the critters out, then the law can't help him."

The marshal watched the open little face as he spoke. Pancho, as Les Brown called him, nodded shortly, turned to the old man and spoke in a gutteral, throaty tongue. The old man listened for a moment; then his eyes clouded and dropped to the thick fingered hands folded serenely in his ragged lap. The boy grunted a few more words at him, and the old face came up slowly. There was a patient scorn mixed with affection in his eyes as he spoke slowly to the boy. Pancho listened, frowned, and faced Les Brown.

"He say it all the same. Nice words, good pictures, fine promises, and all lies. He say, 'Pancho, you good boy, my boy, but don't believe white men. They lie.' He say Musselshell cows, white cows, bean field, Indian bean field. No fence laws, no promises, no pictures change it. White cows can walk over Indian fields, that is all."

Les Brown rolled a cigaret in silence. The grandfather belonged to the yesterdays which Les remembered vaguely. In those days, Indians were considered animals, not men; but things had changed, even if the old Indians didn't believe it. He didn't want Pancho to grow up with those lurking, haunting suspicions in him. Brown lit the cigaret and tossed the tobacco sack toward the old man, who caught it and somberly laid it back on the desk. Les understood the gesture plainly enough; he flushed a slight red and pocketed the refused tobacco sack. His eyes flicked accusingly over the old man, who returned his glance unblinkingly. He exhaled a big cloud of smoke and swung toward Pancho.

"Listen son, your grandfather's a fine man. Old warrior, peaceable citizen. Good hombre. But he's wrong. Look—tell him that if he'll build a real strong fence to keep the cows out, and then they come back in, I'll make Musselshell keep 'em out. Un'erstand?"

Pancho nodded eagerly and a babble of hissing, sputtering words fell over one another as he explained what the marshal had said. The old man listened again in somber, reflective silence; then his seamed, tired old face came up slowly and his eyes were bitterly frank. He mumbled to the boy but he was looking at Les Brown.

"He ask, you promise?"

"Seguro, Pancho. Tell him it's a promise from a straight tongue."

The boy translated, and the old man got up, held his arm shoulder high, palm outward, and walked out of the

office. Pancho flashed a dazzling smile and followed his grandfather. He shrugged, at the door, and Les understood; no lesson today—he had to work on the fence. Les shrugged and smiled ruefully; they understood each other. The little urchin disappeared beyond the threshold and Les smoked in thoughtful silence, going back over the early days and recalling all things he had heard, as a boy, about the Coco Maricopa Indians.

Lesson time came again, the following day, and again Pancho came. This time he entered the Marshal's office with the old man and a younger, heavily-muscled man who was a little younger than the Marshal. This Indian could speak fairly voluble, if ungrammatical, English.

Pancho introduced him. "This my Father. He have bean field too."

Les motioned them to chairs. He thought he knew what was coming. The fence had been completed and they were going to tell him about it. He sat down patiently and waited.

The younger man cleared his throat. He was obviously uneasy. "We fixed fence. Worked like hell all afternoon yesterday. Work 'til late in the dark. Nail up damned planks, put on more damned wire. Make it strong like hell," he threw up his hands and raised and lowered his powerful shoulders. "Cows come through again like damn. No bean crop left this mornin'." He looked meaningly at Les. "You keep promise, now?"

LES SQUIRMED inwardly. How could he explain to them that a hungry critter that's once been through a fence, will force entrance in the same spot again, if it's at all possible? They wouldn't understand, or care; all they wanted and expected, was for him to keep his promise.

He began a methodical cigaret, finished it and passed the tobacco over. This time both solemn Indians rolled cigarets, lighted off his match, and watched him impassively. Les knew what they were thinking. He sparred for time. "How'd they get in?"

The old grandfather reached under a filthy old levi jacket and brought forth two short lengths of barbed wire. He handed them to Les without a word. Les looked frowningly at the wire. There were neat, abrupt cuts in one end, ragged breaks in the other end.

The idea began to dawn in his mind. "Which end did you make, when you broke 'em off?"

The younger man arose, leaned over the desk and tapped the ragged, broken ends with his heavy, dark finger. Les' frown deepened. "Then what you're sayin' is that your fence is being cut; right?"

"Si, yes."

Les turned the wires over in his big hands and a greyish spiral of smoke from his cigaret wandered lazily up his granite face, past the squinted blue eyes, faded from the desert sun, and around the edge of his curled Stetson. This was altogether different. A lot of times cowmen, when the feed was poor, had a nasty little habit of cutting fences so that their critters could find good feed. This wasn't the first time it had happened and wouldn't be the last time, so long as the open-range laws were on the books.

"All Musselshell cows?"

"Yes."

Les placed his cigaret carefully, smoking end out, on the edge of his desk. He thumbed his hat to the back of his head and a crisp lock of iron grey hair fell indifferently across his broad forehead as he gazed at the stubby, gnarled pieces of barbed wire on his desk. Ketchum and he had crossed twice before: once over the no-gun ordinance passed by the City Council, and again when Musselshell cowboys had stampeded a herd of horses

through a neighbor's meadows. Les stared at the wire and the Indians stared at the Marshal. Trouble with Musselshell would be bad. He shrugged; there was no alternative. You couldn't reason with Ketchum; he only understood one thing: force. Les raised his eyes and looked thoughtfully at the patient Coco Maricopas.

"All right. I'll go see the Musselshell." He squinted at the old man. "There's goin' to be trouble over this." He was still staring at the seamed, faded old face when the younger man interpreted. The old Indian nodded in affirmative recognition and answered softly.

The younger man faced Les when he spoke. "He says it can't be helped. He says he's old; but he can fight, too." The husky Indian smiled deprecatingly. " 'Course he can't. Too old." There was a significant pause, then more soft, low words. "But I can."

Les nodded. Nothing would cause the old animosities to arise so quickly as for an Indian to get into a fight with a white man. He looked pointedly at the Father of his little mascot, who was taking it all in like a small lizard. "You go on home an' don't get cocky. If there's any trouble, you fellows stay clear of it."

He wanted to impress on them the dangerous situation that probably would arise from an Indian filing charges against Ketchum's outfit, but he didn't want to put it into words for fear Pancho would interpret it to mean what his grandfather had said—that Indians were not the equals of whites under the law.

"All right, boys, that's all. I'll keep my promise, but dammit, don't any of you come to town or pack a gun, or get into any trouble until this thing's settled." He watched the Indians leave, sat at his desk for several moments after they left, then got up and strolled across the road to the saloon.

- 2 -

ARROWHEAD had its usual Saturday morning rush of business. Les had to wade through a trickle of vehicles that would grow into a stream of animal and human overflow from the local ranches, come to town for Saturday gossiping and shopping. It was an old story to Les. There would be the usual drunks, belligerent and crying, and the normal amount of fights. The sun was pretty warm and the air was as clear as glass. He nodded to several men, doffed his hat twice to women, and skirted two stiff-haired, circling hounds of nondescript parentage before he pushed through the doors of Ike Hause's *Royal Flush Saloon.*

There was a good, pungent smell in the saloon of malt and tobacco. Les returned Ike's wink of recognition and ordered a beer. There were already ten or fifteen riders and ranchers, drinking a leisurely stein of beer, and the soft rumble of male voices in general conversation rolled unheard over the muted sounds of the bustling town. Les' tall, whipcord frame was draped easily against the bar. He was relaxed and comfortable, with no particular worries and only a partially interested concern with what was going on around him. The Ketchum affair was in the back of his mind, but only as another facet connected to the tribulations of his office; he'd been a lawman too long to give it more than a cursory and relatively unimportant place in his routine of existence, however, he hadn't forgotten it.

Les was still toying with his cold beer when a small dust cloud rose lazily outside the saloon. He remembered,

later, thinking with mild irritation, that cowboys hadn't ought to ride hell for leather into town when the road was congested with people; but he didn't think much about it as he turned slowly and watched the three men come banging through the batwing doors, slapping small clouds of dust from their shirts and pants as their musical spurs tinkled softly under the impact of their booted feet.

When he recognised the three men, he remembered the three Coco Maricopas. Cliff Ketchum, stalking grandly in front of his two top hands, swung up to the bar. The Marshal noticed with annoyance that Cliff's jacket bulged a little at the left armpit; he returned Ketchum's nod but his eyes were cool. Cliff knew that the city council had passed an ordinance against wearing guns in town, but he was just the type of a man who would wear a gun into town—knowing it was against the law—whether he ever went armed anywhere else or not. Brown decided to ignore the violation for the time being. He wasn't a badge-conscious lawman, and a minor infraction was likely to be overlooked so long as the violater behaved himself.

"Buy you a drink, Les?"

The Marshal shrugged slightly, indifferently. "It's good brew, all right, Cliff. Real cold."

Ike Hause, recovering from his start at seeing the obvious gun bulge under Ketchum's jacket, slid two beers before the men, then two more for Ketchum's cowboys. Cliff drank his avidly, banged down the thick glass and ordered another. He turned to Les. "Feller sure gets dry on a day like today."

"Yeah."

"Say, Les; my boys tell me you got In'yun trouble. That right?"

"What kind of trouble?"

"Oh, one of the boys said he seen

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some of them thievin' desert scum come out of your office a little while ago."

The Marshal's gorge was rising. He turned casually and let his cool eyes wander acidly over the two men with Ketchum. Neither had a gun, he noticed. "Didn't know you paid your men to keep tabs on me, Cliff."

There was a moment's silence when Ike Hause slid Ketchum his second beer and let a worried glance flicker briefly over the two men. Ketchum's face lost a little of its pseudo geniality at Les' words. "Hell. I don't; but then I manage to keep abreast of what's goin' on, too."

Les tried to figure the meaning behind the words. "Well, it's no secret, Cliff. As a matter of fact, I was figurin' on ridin' out your way this evenin' —after it cooled down a little—an' havin' a little palavar with you."

KETCHUM'S face was impassive now, and a little glint of antagonism showed in his eyes. "Yeah? Well, as long as I'm here it'll save you a ride; what's the palavar about?"

"Musselshell cows."

Cliff laughed scornfully. "Every time one of those root-eaters is too lazy to keep up his fence, he gets sore because my critters get into some damned pepper patch he's got. Hell, Les, I got so many critters I can't keep an eye on all of 'em. Anyway, what's a damned pepper field amount to?"

Les shrugged. "Maybe nothin', to you or me; but those In'yuns work pretty hard over their little patches, an' it's about all they've got. If critters go through their fences it pretty well ruins 'em."

"There's lots o' cows on the outrange, y'know."

"Sure, but these happen to be Musselshell critters."

"Well—it's too bad, Les, but I can't help it."

Les knew that the blowup was com-

ing, now; but he still leaned indifferently against the bar, facing Ketchum and his listening, quiet riders. Accusing a man of cutting fences wasn't a good joke; and, when it wasn't done in a joking sense, it was fight talk.

The Marshal picked his words carefully. "Normally, I'd say you're right. If it's an accident, an' the critters bust through a fence, it's not necessarily the owner's fault; but when the fence is deliberately cut and the planks kicked off'n it—well, Cliff, that's something else again."

The two Musselshell riders stiffened without looking up. They were studiously turning their beer glasses and avoiding a look at the Marshal or their employer. Ketchum's face was turning a mottled scarlet, and his faded blue eyes were glassy and staring. "Les, are you intimatin' that I cut fences?"

Brown shook his head slowly, eyes locked with those of Ketchum. "No, Cliff; I'm not intimatin' anythin'. Whether you did it or some of your riders, I don't know—and I don't give a damn either. What I'm sayin' is just this: someone cut the fences into an In'yun's bean field and shoved Musselshell critters in there. It ain't likely that a stranger did it, since no one but the Musselshell would profit from fat Musselshell critters. Now, if you want to interpret that to mean *you* did it, then go ahead; otherwise keep your cattle out of land where the fences have to be cut to get 'em in."

It was a long speech for Les Brown, but he meant every word of it. An exceedingly nervous Ike Hause was swabbing frantically at the bartop, near enough to the two men to hear every word that had been said. He stabbed a quick, anticipatory glance at Ketchum, saw the heavy vein that ran down the side of the man's thick neck bulge and throb, and looked away.

For a long moment there wasn't a sound in the saloon. Cliff Ketchum was armed, and so was the Marshal. One of them had to back water or fight. Whoever backed down might just as well pack up and leave Arrowhead; they both knew it. Ketchum was at a slight disadvantage, however; while he had his .45 in a shoulder holster, he wasn't adept at drawing it from that position.

The air whistled noisily through his extended nostrils, and his voice was low and even when he spoke. "You called it, Les; remember that. I'll be back tomorrow an' I'll come ready."

The Marshal allowed a tauntingly cold smile to flit over his otherwise wary features. "What's wrong with right now, Cliff? That shoulder holster too awkward?"

With a savage volley of curses, Ketchum whirled and stamped out of the saloon, followed by his two riders. Les relaxed and caught Hause's eye as the anxious bartender stopped swiping at the bartop. "Pretty close, Ike."

Hause nodded shakily. "Les, fer gawd's sake don't bring him in here when he comes back, tomorrow; I'm tryin' to run a respectable joint. Gunfights wreck a place."

The Marshal nodded thoughtfully. "I'll try not to, Ike, but you can't always lay these things out the way you want 'em to happen. The other hombre has somethin' to say about where the play's goin' to be made."

Ike watched Brown stalk casually out of the saloon, cross the road again

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through the tangle of horse powered traffic, and go into his office. He turned to several silent, watching cowboys who had listened to the whole affair with a forlorn wag of his head. "Damn. I thought for a minute all hell was goin' to bust loose."

One of the riders nodded somberly. "Yeah," his voice was dryly tart, "an' Ketchum would've too, if he hadn't been all tangled up in that armpit holster. Phew! I had my window all picked out an' was ready to sail through it. That was damned close."

He looked meaningly at his companions. "I'm goin' to be in town tomorrow an' see the end of this. I'll tell the little woman I'm goin' to church."

Another of the cowboys snorted loudly. "Hah! I want to be here too, but mainly I want to see you try an' get in a church."

There was a round of tart laughter, and the riders paid up and left the saloon. Ike Hause, alone at last, stared unblinkingly through the window toward the Marshal's office. He shrugged uncomfortably, reached under the counter, took up a sawed-off, double barrelled shotgun. Ike flipped it open, inserted two thick, red shells from a nearby box, closed the gun and placed it back out of sight; then he went back to wiping the counter top, a very solemn look on his face.

- 3 -

LES BROWN saddled up early in the afternoon and headed down toward the creek, where a straggling of unkempt, squatty little hovels served as homes for a miserable little band of Coco Maricopas who farmed tiny hand tilled fields. He rode slowly, studying the small farms as he passed, occasionally returning greetings in bad Spanish with the Indians, who arose from their labors among the beans and peppers and flashed big grins to him. Les smiled to himself. News sure travels fast. That he was the "patron" of the Coco Maricopas had sped from mouth to mouth after he had promised to look into the cut fence incident. He could tell by the way they smiled.

The day was one of those rare emeralds of Summer that are clear, warm without being hot, and softly caressing —with a tiny, errant zephyr blowing against the nostrils, burdened with the fragrance of sage blooms and juniper scents. The Marshal reined up before the mud wattle home of Pancho's family.

After tying his horse to a rickety, weathered old fence of patched boards, he strolled leisurely down the hard earthen path toward the hovel, his eyes roaming over the neat little fields, now so churned and trampled that hardly a plant was left. His gaze went beyond the fields to the fence. It was a good fence—better than most of the ranchers had. There were solid cedar posts, lateral planks and barbed wire in between them. He nodded somberly to himself; no critter pushed his way through that fence.

Les was almost to the hovel when Pancho, the boy's father, and his grandfather came out. The little urchin, beady black eyes shining with delight, laughed as he ran to meet the tall, lean Marshal. "We was hopin' you'd come. See fence you'self. Come on."

The boy darted away, looking over his shoulder, like a fledgling retriever pup. Les grinned at him, then swung to face the men. They all inclined their heads a little and the Father smiled; evidently it was a smile of relief.

The old grandfather was as impassive as ever. "Ya like to see damn fence?"

Les nodded and the Indians led the way. It wasn't hard to understand what the ruined bean field they walked over meant to the squalid Indians, but the Marshal affected not to notice the devastation, as did the Indians. They came to the broken part of the fence. Les tossed a cursory look at the planks, all lying outside of the field. He stooped and examined the ends of the remaining strands of wire: cut, every last one of them. He got up, fished out the inevitable tobacco sack of the Southwest, methodically rolled a cigaret, passed the sack on and waited ceremoniously to light his, until the Indians had rolled theirs. For a few moments they smoked in silence, each impassive and motionless. Les could see Pancho's alive black eyes jumping from face to face. He alone was animated.

"I came down here," the Marshal began, "to warn you once more. Don't show up in town today or tomorrow. There's likely to be trouble and it'll be better if you don't get mixed up in it."

Pancho's father nodded affirmatively, very quickly. Les was a little surprised. His glance went to the older man, who was watching him with that unblinking stare. He said something that startled both Pancho and his father. The Marshal turned to Pancho as his father began a torrent of gutteral protest to the old man. "What'd he say, son?"

"Said he know you goin' to fight Ketchum. He say it his fight too, because it's his bean field. He say he'll be there too."

Les straightened up slowly. So the news of the saloon argument had even found its way down to the Coco Maricopa level, along the muddy creek bed. He studied the wizened old face, the color of mahogany, seamed with the myriad fissures of time and hardship in an unfriendly land. He thought he knew how the old man had felt, that first day. The oldster was one of the people who had seen persecution all of

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their lives, savage, vicious arrogance against the simple natives of the hard land. And Les understood that the old man had long since discovered that the American was no different from the Spanish, or the Mexicans; as a nation he was violent, cruel and domineering to the Indians. But now and then, here and there, one found individual Americans—as with the Mexicans and Spaniards—who would have been good and honest men, no matter what their race. And—to the old Coco Maricopa, that earthy and practical groaning of wagalone mattered—not a flag, a color, or a tongue. He knew that the Marshal was going to fight for him and his little bean field, and that was a fearless and good man's mode of conduct; so what could be more reasonable than that he, too, should fight beside his "patron".

"Tell him to stay out of it."

Pancho's father remonstrated some more and the old grandfather gradually got a hurt, bewildered look on his face. Les tried to explain, again, that it was better for them to stay out of it or it might start an anti-Indian uprising. Such things had happened before. The old man finally shrugged, but he refused to say that he wouldn't be in town. Les bent over and put a big, bony hand on Pancho's thin shoulder. "Who told him about the fight today?"

Pancho's eyes were sparkling, but he just grinned and shrugged. *"Yo no se."*

LES RODE back to town after drawing the father aside, and making him promise to keep Pancho and the old man out of town. Evening shadows were falling over Arrowhead when the Marshal stabled his horse at the livery barn and walked slowly up the crowded wooden sidewalk to his office. It was Saturday night, and already one could sense the supressed excitement in the town. Most of the ranch folk had long gone, their grocery-laden spring wagons creaking and groaning behind the straining teams. Now, only a few couples were visible on the sidewalks and verandas. The town was filled with cowboys, in for a night of hijinks, dressed in their best and most colorful clothes; spurs tinkling musically, they laughed and yelled back and forth, and, arm in arm, went from saloon to saloon.

Les had eaten at the Chinaman's, down the way a few doors, and was enjoying his after-dinner smoke in his office. Gradually the sounds of Arrowhead had changed from the solid, ons and buzzing of everyday ranch talk. Now, the atmosphere carried the muted sounds of revelry, with an occasional piano lending a raucous, out-of-tune, background to the babble. Brown listened indifferently, like a physician taking a pulse, conscious, yet unconscious, of the pistol shot, curse, scream or bellow that might erupt at any moment, signifying that the Marshal was needed fast!

Two Musselshell cowboys rode stiffly into town, tied up at a nearly vacant hitching rail. They swung up the steps of the *Royal Flush Saloon,* and were about to enter, when one mumbled something to the other, and both looked quickly toward the Marshal's office. Les was watching them thoughtfully through the window. They hustled inside the saloon and Les frowned slightly.

He puffed dreamily on his cigaret for a moment longer, then suddenly threw it down and stamped it out, got up, yanked on his hat and walked out of the office. Dusk was fast falling now; shadows were full-bodied and purplish as the Marshal crossed the roadway and entered the saloon behind the Musselshell riders. He looked over the noisy throng, caught Ike Hause's anxious eye, winked, and continued to filter faces past his memory until he saw the men he was looking for.

With a genial smile, Les Brown el-

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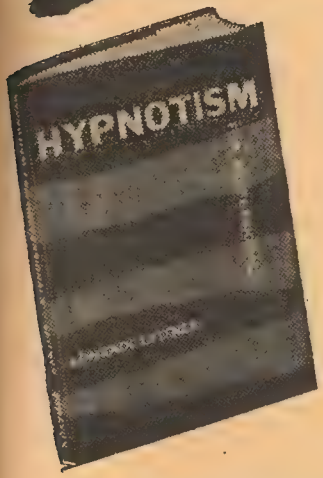

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bowed up beside the Musselshell men. "Howdy, boys."

"Howdy."

"Alone?"

"Yeah."

"Where's the rest of the crew?"

"Dun't know."

Les nodded to Ike, who was watching him like a hawk, and the saloon owner brought a glass of beer. "I always figured I could count on the Musselshell in town on Saturday night."

The two Ketchum riders were uneasy and silent. The Marshal drank his beer, laughed softly and strode out of the saloon. Once outside, the grin vanished from his face; he swung across the road again and hiked for the livery barn, saddled up and rode out of town in a long legged lope, around the back way that avoided the main street. The night was warm and dark. What little light there was came from a weak, new moon and a galaxy of twinkling stars that rode across the Heavens in a filmy heat haze. Occasionally, he passed a house where the yellow, feeble light of the lamps within threw oblong and square patches of light against the dark, sleeping earth.

LES COULD hear the creek, but darkness kept him from seeing it. Still, the ground was as familiar to him as the back of his hand; he knew where he was even though he couldn't see anything more than dark, squat silhouettes against the lighter blankness of the ground. He swung down under an old, weary, dust-laden oak, tied his horse, and walked on afoot until he came to the Indian hovel, where the flickering, indifferent splashes of light indicated that candles were burning within.

A short knock brought Pancho's father to the door and the Marshal felt a little of the tenseness go out of him. He ducked his head as he entered the mud house. Pancho was peering out, wide-eyed, alert, from his bunk-bed built against one thick wall. The old grandfather and a thick waisted, blank faced squaw were seated at a thick, oaken table, eating out of heavy crockery bowls by the vagrant light of two burly candles.

Les sat down with a nod and blew thoughtfully on the coffee that the younger Indian set before him. Nothing was said until the meal was finished; then the old grandfather wiped his mouth delicately with the cuff of his frayed levi jacket, accepted Les' tobacco sack and methodically rolled a quirley. He mumbled something and his son, constrained by none of the punctiliousness of the older generation, interpreted around a mouth full of food. "Pretty night."

Les nodded somberly, a flicker of humor in his eyes. Even in the face of imminent danger, the Indian is always casual, indifferent and nonchalant—or appears to be, anyway. "Yes; nice warm night. No moon though."

The old man listened to the interpretation between fragrant inhalations on his cigaret, never once looking at the Marshal. He bobbed his head gently as though solemnly aware of the darkness outside, allowed a moment to pass then spoke again. "Arrowhead must be quiet, this Saturday night, for the Marshal to be able to leave town."

Les furtively studied the old face as the son interpreted, and wondered if the old man suspected something. He shrugged elaborately and said nothing. While the little silence enveloped them, the Coco Maricopa woman got up noiselessly and waddled out of the room. A door slammed somewhere, and Les surmised that she had left the house. A sibilant, soft sound came to the men in the room. Men on horseback were riding down the dusty, pitted old road among the Indian hovels.

Les listened carefully and a warmth stole through him. He had been right, back there in the saloon, when he had

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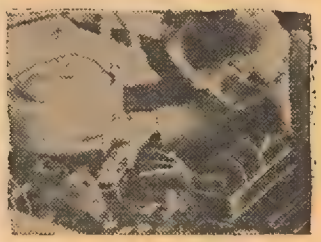

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seen the two Musselshell riders come into town. He smiled wolfishly in the candlelight. There was an undeniable satisfaction in out-guessing someone—especially a hard, shrewd man like Cliff Ketchum.

The old, mahogany-colored face came slowly around and the obsidian eyes were full on his face. He knew then that the old man hadn't been making idle talk when he had remarked about the Marshal leaving Arrowhead on a Saturday night. Les let his eyes rest thoughtfully on the old man's face and nodded his head ever so slightly. The byplay went unnoticed by the younger Indian, but Pancho, from his grimy pallet, caught the unspoken understanding between his friend and his grandfather. The jingle of rein chains and spur rowels came softly to the three men and the boy. The horsemen were getting closer now. Unconsciously the two Indians and the Town Marshal tensed inwardly as they listened. The riders were in front of the hovel and Les was holding a smoking cigaret before his face, eyes pinpoints in the mellow gloom of the barren room, and then the horses stopped. Les arose slowly, snuffed out his cigaret and faced the Indians. This was it.

"Stay here. I'll do the talkin'."

- 4 -

THE YOUNGER Indian looked surprised. His eyes went inquiringly from his old father's impassive countenance to the hard, tanned face of the Marshal. He managed a garrulous, "What the hell?" as Les walked to the door, opened it and stepped outside.

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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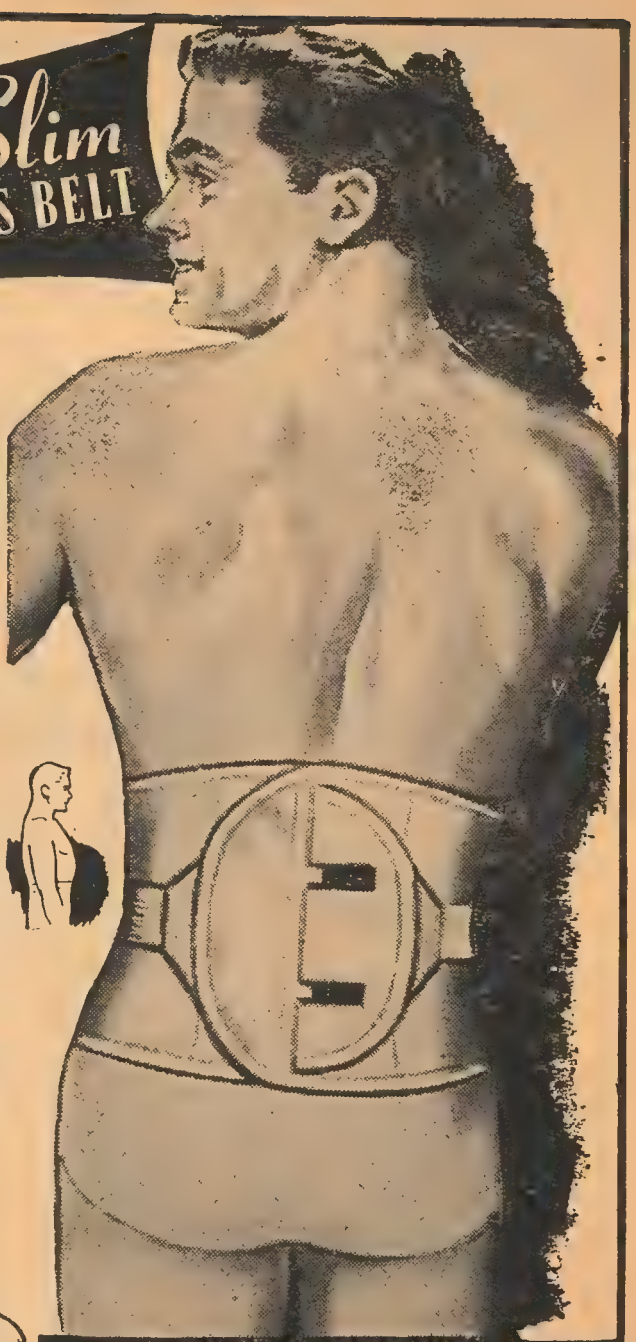

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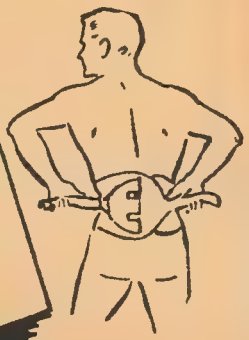

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For a long moment there was absolute silence; then he could hear voices outside. They were harsh, grating voices, the kind of voices white men used when they were on the prod. He stabbed a quick look at the softly-shining eyes of his father across the candle-lighted table and saw a faint, ominous smile on the old man's face. He got up slowly, blew out one candle, and hunkered near a window. The old man got up too, but he went through the lean-to kitchen, picked up something that was leaning against the back wall, and slipped out of the house into the soft darkness.

"Howdy, Les; what you doin' away from town? Ain't you afraid some drunk cowboy'll shoot up the place?" Ketchum's words were mildly bantering, but Les caught mild surprise and disappointment, mingled with chagrin, in the words.

He slouched against the weak old front fence and forced a muscular smile that had no mirth in it, and shrugged. "No, Cliff, ain't worryin' much about that. Seems there's other things on the books, tonight, maybe."

"Such as?"

Les shook his head slowly and looked up at the tall, wide-shouldered man on the horse and an almost tangible spark of antagonism shot between them. "That's not for me to say, Cliff."

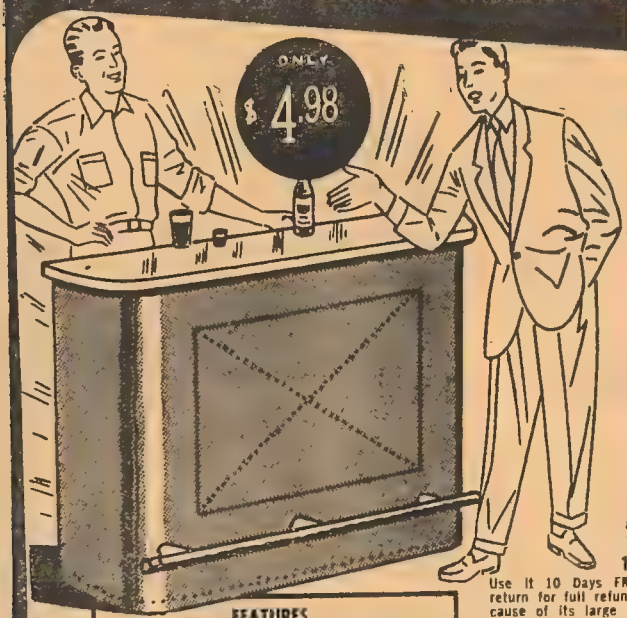
"No?"

"No."

"Didn't figger on meetin' you 'til tomorrow."

[*Turn To Page* 86]

BE THE PERFECT HOST! COMPLETE PORTABLE HOME BAR



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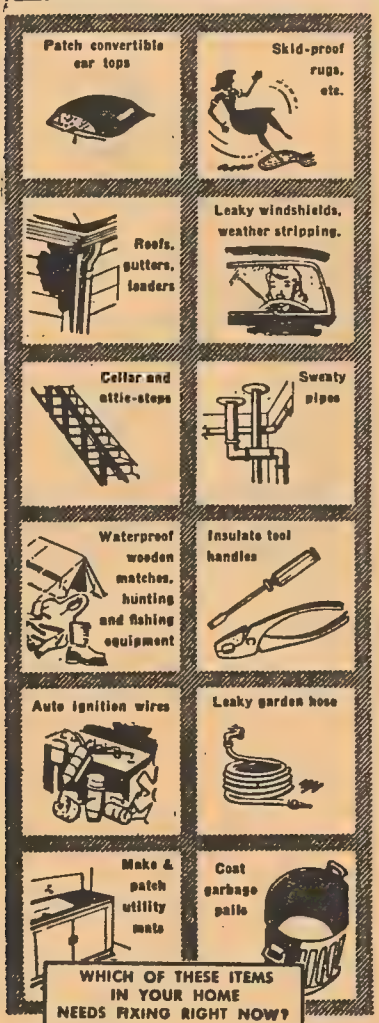

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Les didn't answer and the silence became heavy and awkward. Ketchum shifted in his saddle so that he was facing Brown. The Marshal's eyes darted quickly to the four riders behind the Musselshell owner. They were all armed and sober-faced; it was coming, now, after all.

For a second, Les had thought that Cliff might back down and ride on. He smiled inwardly to himself with a sort of savage satisfaction; of course, Cliff couldn't backwater twice in the same day. Maybe he would have liked to ride away from what was ahead, normally; but he couldn't do it now—not after eating crow earlier. He had to make a stand now or never.

Les' eyes were sardonically acid. "Well?" It was softly spoken.

Ketchum sighed and a small sound came to the Marshal's ears. They were both intensely alert now. "Les, I come down here to find out why that damned In'yun said I cut his fence an' I'm goin' to find out."

The Marshal was shaking his head when he answered. "You don't have to ask him, Cliff. I got the cut ends of the wire. I seen the field, an' the Musselshell cows; an' I'm here to say that what the In'yun says is true."

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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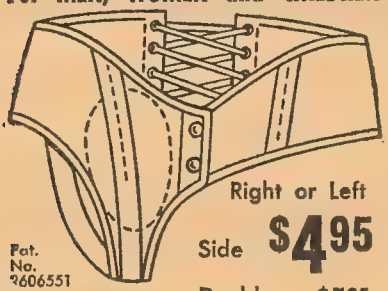

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Ketchum's teeth glowed eerily in the watery light and his eyes were hard. "You sidin' with the In'yun, Les?"

"Ain't sidin' with no one. In the eyes of the law, Cliff, you're wrong an' he's right. You done deliberate damages an' he's got a legitimate claim."

"Look, Marshal—"

Les wanted it over and he broke in loudly. "No, by gawd; *you listen.* You come down here to scare out some In'yuns, an' bully your way through where you got no call to come gunnin', an' I'm here to keep the peace. Now, if you're goin' to make a play, make it. If not, ride on, Cliff. Choose!"

There was an awful moment of deep, throbbing tenseness in the watery darkness. The hovels with their cheery little splashes of orange light; the warm, fragrant night air; the motionless riders behind Ketchum, and the distant cry of a lonely coyote were all lost in the thread of eternity that ran through the ghostly atmosphere. Then Ketchum made his play.

Les saw it coming with the almost imperceptible drooping of the man's right shoulder, silhouetted against the cobalt sky, and the Marshal felt the weight of his .45 in his own hand. The two guns went off almost simultaneously. Les felt a burning sensation along his ribs and his gun shattered the quiet of the night with its awful roar. Tongues of savage flame lanced into the brooding night. The Marshal fired again and again and moved on stiff legs as he fired.

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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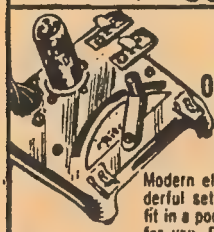

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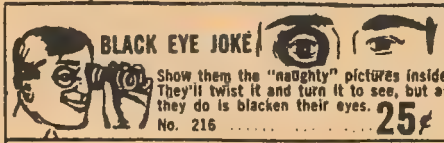

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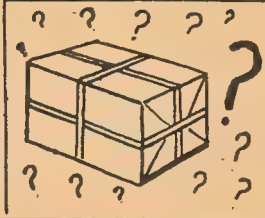

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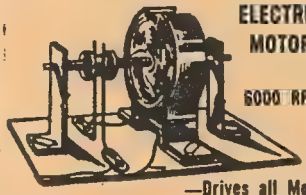

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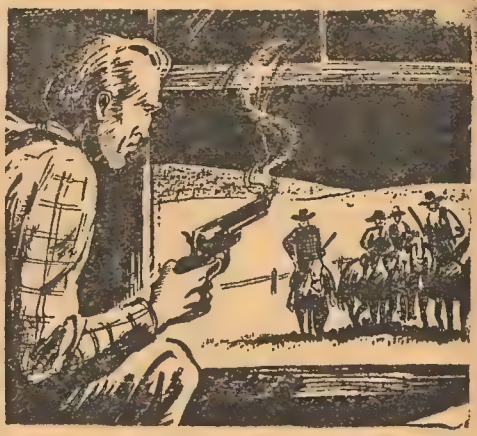
Les Brown was too old a hand to stand in one place as he fired; the night became a hell of gunfire and pandemonium as horses shied and men cursed. Again the fury of fire burned into the Marshal and this time he went down. There was a warm, sticky feeling inside his pants leg below the left hip. Cursing now, Les Brown knelt on his good leg and methodically, calmly, fired into the flashes of the Musselshell guns. As suddenly as it began, it was over.



THE FRONTIER had just enough crude, brusque law in its dawning new era to make legal gunfights questionable; and Cliff Ketchum's widow had enough money to hire a Denver attorney to press murder charges against Les Brown. He was still invalided and uncomfortable when the hastily-appointed temporary Town Marshal came to see him. It was Ike Hause.

"Aw, hell, Les—you're all right. The whole town's fer ya."

Les smiled dolefully. "Thanks, Ike. In the old days it wouldn't have been this embarrassin', though, would it?"

"No, but damn these here Denver lawyers anyway. They gotta live, I reckon, but I'll be swung if I know why. Why, ever'one in Arrowhead knows it was five to one. What in hell kind of odds is that? Ain't a man livin' who could be hung fer murder when

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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they was odds like that agin' him."

Les grinned and wagged his head ruefully. "When's the trial?"

The saloon owner looked at the toes of his boots, plainly uncomfortable. "That's what I was sent over to tell you. It'll be tomorrow." He looked up at his old friend. "Damn it, Les, I wished you was clear o' this mess. I sure don't want this damned badge." He arose quickly and swallowed a couple of times, hard. "Gotta go; see you at noon tomorrow at the trial."

Les nodded slowly. "S'long, Ike. You might have to keep that badge."

Hause's emphatic and blistering denial drifted after him as he left the room, and Les Brown grinned softly into the sunlight as he watched his friend stamp grumpily through the dusty roadway toward the saloon, head down and hands rammed angrily into his pockets.

THE DENVER lawyer was good; Les had to admit that. The stranger built up his case carefully and eloquently. He said that the Marshal deliberately went to the Indian's hovel because he knew there would be trouble. He claimed that Ketchum had been taken unaware. He painted a wonderful verbal picture of Les Brown skulking through the darkness, planning mayhem, of attacking the Musselshell men in the darkness. In fact, Les himself began to wonder if maybe folks wouldn't believe it as he looked at the sober, blank faced jurymen whose faded, squinted eyes listened and watched and weighted the Denver lawyer without so much as a flicker of an eyelash.

"And, in concluding my case, gentlemen," said the starched shirt attorney, "I want to call your attention to the fact that no one actually saw the Musselshell cows break through the fence. Therefore no one can prove that Musselshell riders broke down that fence. Consequently, Marshal Brown had no

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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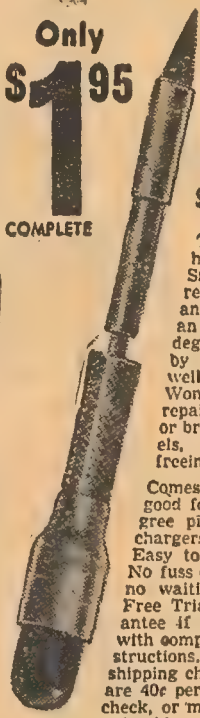

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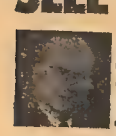

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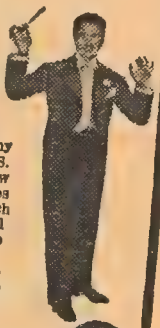

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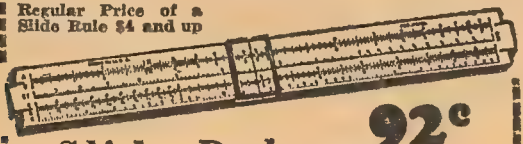

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proof of foul play, and couldn't have legally said the Musselshell men were guilty of any infraction of the law."

Les got up slowly, painfully, using his crutches awkwardly. He felt unequal to the job of defending himself after the oratory of the Denver lawyer and wished now that he'd hired an attorney, himself. He ran an eye over the jury. There was old Buzz Waters. Hell, he'd jugged Buzz a hundred times until he sobered up. And young Bob Hunt; he'd disarmed him in front of the whole town for packing a gun after passage of the no-gun ordinance. He swallowed and felt futile, standing there.

"Well, Marshal, what have you to say?"

Les turned slightly and looked at old Judge Evans. He knew the retired Senator well, and cleared his throat self consciously.

"Gentlemen," he was surprised at the strength of his voice and took some small confidence from its firmness. "Maybe it was as the Denver feller says. Maybe I was plannin' murder when I went up against five Musselshell men." He shook his head dourly. "All I got to say to that is, if a man's crazy enough to go up, alone, against five men an' try to murder 'em—an' them all armed and ready—he's a plumb damned fool."

There was a thunderous roar of laughter and Judge Evans frowned and banged sharply for order. He looked down grimly at Les. "Marshal, humor has its place, but not in a courtroom. Proceed."

Les looked down at the floor sheepishly; he hadn't meant to be humorous. "I'm sorry, Caleb, I—"

"Your Honor, Marshal!"

"Uh—yeah. I'm sorry, Your Honor. I was jus' tryin' to make a point that no man can be a murderer when he's fightin' five to one odds, can he?"

"I object, Your Honor. This man is trying—"

[*Turn To Page* 96]

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"Objection sustained. Proceed, Marshal."

"I got some pieces of cut barbed wire that'll prove them Musselshell cows come into the In'yun's bean field with human help." He handed the wires to one of the jurymen, who looked at them closely and passed them along. "Critters don't carry fence tools; an' if they did, I've never seen one smart enough to use 'em." Again the loud laughter, and again the Judge thumped furiously for order.

"Marshal Brown, confine yourself to facts. One more outburst like that an' I'll clear the court."

LES NODDED in embarrassment. His forehead was beaded with perspiration now. The Ketchum's attorney was on his feet again. This time he wore a triumphant smile.

"Your Honor, barbed wire has been known to break under impact so that it represents, perfectly, the image of cut wire. This is especially true in cases of molecular crystallization. Marshal Brown's contention can be refuted easily."

The cowmen were looking in wonder at the Denver attorney, whose tongue-twisting words threw them completely. They were beginning to fear for Les Brown when an old, beady-eyed Indian, who was listening avidly to a small, animated urchin's interpretation of the proceedings, grunted harshly, arose and thundered strange, gutteral words into the startled courtroom.

For a moment, there was long and uneasy silence; then a small, piping voice cut in behind the old man's voice as a very small, thin and ragged little Coco Maricopa stood defiantly beside his old grandfather, his tremulous hand tight in the old man's calloused, work blunted fingers.

"He my gran'father. He very old. He say maybeso wire break like man with shiny hair say."

[*Turn To Page* 98]

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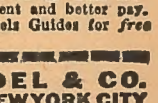

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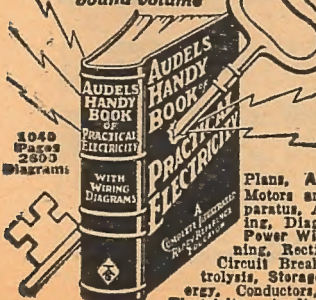

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There were some snickers in the rear of the room and the Judge frowned menacingly.

"But my gran'father say this: he say all boards on fence were nailed on outside of posts; yet when cows come through, no planks broke, but all planks lyin' on outside of fence. My gran'father old man. He seen much, but he say he don' never see cows that can pull planks off fence, an' put 'em on outside of fence, when they pushin' against 'em. That all he say."

For a long, critical moment there wasn't a sound, then the Judge banged lustily on the bench and turned to Brown. "You said all you got to say, Les—er—Marshal Brown?"

"Well, Your Honor, I was—"

"Yes. Well, I think then that we'll charge the jury—"

"What for, Your Honor? I thought they—"

"Shut up, Les—er—Marshal Brown. Harruumph! Gentlemen of the jury, you may retire an' consult an' bring back your verdict. An' say, gentlemen, don't take too long, will you; it's gettin' late?"

The jury retired and the courtroom buzzed with speculation. Judge Evans beckoned to Les Brown and the Marshal hobbled up to the bench. "Les, I had to shut you up. That In'yun kid summed up a damned good case for you. If you'd of talked for another hour you couldn't have made it any better. Anyway—"

The Judge was interrupted by the quick return of the jury. He looked up, startled. "Go back an' sit down, Les; after this here is over I'll meet you at Ike's back room for a game of stud."

Les stumbled back to his chair bewildered; it was a little too fast for him. Judge Evans arose to his full and portly height of five feet three inches and scowled menacingly at the self conscious foreman of the jury. "Well, gentlemen, have you arrived at a verdict?"

"I reckon, Judge." The tall, tanned, lean foreman looked hastily behind him for assurance, swung back and shifted his cud of chewing tobacco. "Us fellers find Les Brown—er—I mean the defendant—not guilty by a damned sight!"

Judge Evans banged for order as the old wooden building shook with wild cheers, but to no avail. He tossed down his mallet, arose with a ferocious scowl, and stalked out of the room stopping at the door to his chambers just long enough to toss a quick, furtive wink at the smiling Marshal.

Les Brown was sitting in his office pinning the badge on his shirt before a relieved Ike Hause, and a host of backslapping friends, when a small, dirty face peeked in.

"Come on in, Pancho." The Indian urchin slipped through the throng and shyly smiled up at the Marshal. "We have lesson on cowboys tomorrow?"

Les Brown put a tough hand on the thin shoulders. "You bet'ya, son, an' every day after that 'til you're the top hand o' Arrowhead County!"

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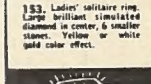
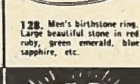
156. Men's massive "Good Luck Horseshoe" ring. 4-leaf clover. White or yellow gold color effect.

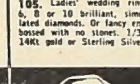
146. Ladies' dinner ring. Gorgeous, large simulated diamond and many smaller white or colored stones.



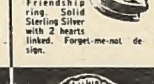
114. Very Special! Ladies' solitaire ring with genuine Zircon, the nearest thing to a genuine diamond. With 2 side stones. 1/30 14Kt yellow gold mounting.



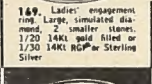
109. Men's signet ring with sparkling, simulated diamond. Heavy yellow gold color effect mounting.



112. Men's exquisite Masonic ring. Yellow gold color effect. Must be seen to be appreciated.



158. Men's Indian Chief's head ring. Yellow or white gold color effect. Also in boys' sizes. Ring comes also in imported, hand carved Corozo Nut.



118. Ladies' Friendship forget-me-not and modern style wedding ring. 1/20 14Kt yellow gold filled or 12Kt gold plate or heavy Sterling Silver. Assorted designs.

10. Boys' and girls' signet ring. Yellow or white gold color effect or Sterling Silver.

157. Men's beautiful, heavy Cameo ring. Large 2-toned Cameo. Classic knight-in-armor and girl design. Yellow or white gold color effect.

44. Men's traditional wedding ring. Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

162. Men's massive lion head ring. Large, simulated diamond in mouth, 2 smaller red stones in eyes.

115. Ladies' engagement ring. Large, brilliant, simulated diamond and many smaller stones. Unusual step design. Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

116. Ladies' exquisite wedding ring. 9 or 7 matching, simulated diamonds all around. Fishtail setting. Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

163. Men's ring. Large, sparkling, simulated red ruby. 1/20 12Kt yellow gold filled or 1/30 14Kt RGP. Also white gold color effect.

171. Ladies' engagement ring. Large, brilliant, simulated diamond with 4 or 6 smaller side stones. 1/30 14Kt RGP.

170. Ladies' graceful wedding ring. 7 brilliant, good-sized, matching, simulated diamonds. 1/30 14Kt RGP.

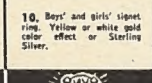
127. Men's ring. Beautiful, large, about 4Kt-size, simulated red ruby stone. Stone comes in all colors. White gold color effect.

141. Ladies' cluster dinner ring. A beautiful gem. 7 or 12 brilliant, simulated diamonds. Center stone also in simulated red ruby. Pierced mounting. Sterling Silver or white gold color effect.

104. Ladies' gorgeous dinner ring. Large, brilliant simulated center diamond, 6 medium-size and many smaller stones. Very rare with so many stones. Ring also comes in varying designs.

168. Ladies' exquisite engagement ring. 2 large, brilliant, simulated center diamonds, 2 or 4 matching side stones. Sterling Silver or 1/30 14Kt gold RGP.

42. Unique hand-clasp love & friendship ring. Comes apart to form 2 rings. Sterling Silver.



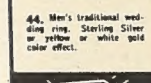
144. Men's massive veteran's discharge ring. Heavy Sterling Silver or yellow gold color effect.

73. Ladies' beautiful 2-toned Cameo ring. Yellow gold color effect.

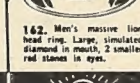
160. Men's large square cut, simulated garnet ring. Yellow or white gold color effect.

152. Sweetheart ring. 2 simulated rubies on entwined hearts. Yellow gold color effect.

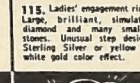
106. Men's solitaire ring. Large, brilliant 2Kt-size simulated diamond. Fine heavy mounting.



161. Ladies' dinner ring. Gorgeous peacock design. 15 sparkling, simulated rubies, sapphires, emeralds. White or yellow gold color effect.



149. Ladies dinner ring. Unusual design. Large, brilliant, simulated diamond, about 10 smaller stones. White gold color effect or Sterling Silver. Ring also comes in oval or square shape design.



167. Ladies' exquisite cluster dinner ring. 3 large, simulated diamonds and many smaller stones. Sterling Silver or white gold color effect.

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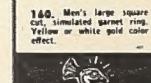
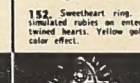
154. Ladies' birthstone ring. Sparkling, square-cut, 1Kt to 4Kt-size simulated green emerald. Sterling Silver or white gold color effect. Stone comes in all colors.

151. Men's ring. Simulated red ruby in center, 2 simulated white diamonds. Yellow or white gold color effect. Also with 3 large white stones.



142. Men's U.S. Army insignia ring. Heavy Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.



145. Men's U.S. Navy insignia ring. Heavy Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

144. Men's U.S. Marine Corps insignia ring. Heavy Sterling Silver or yellow or white gold color effect.

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